

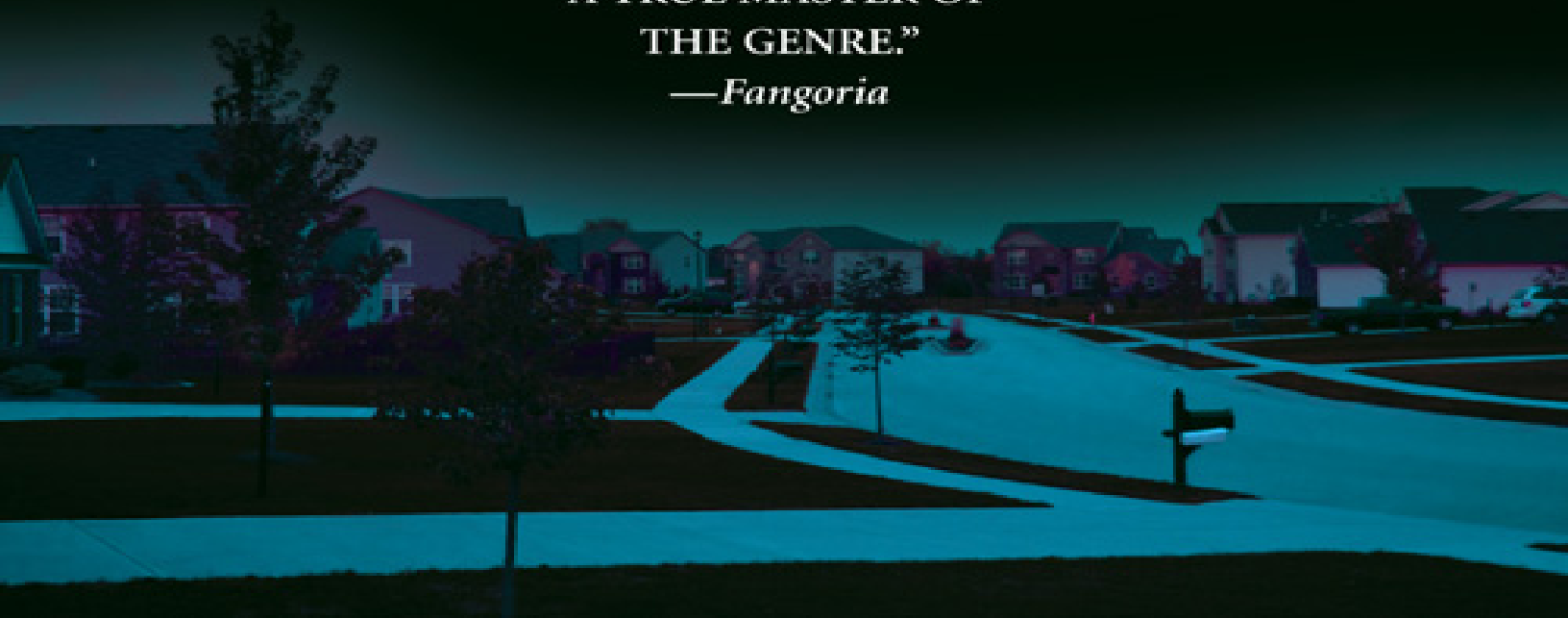
# BRIAN KEENE

BRAM STOKER AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *URBAN GOTHIC*

## DARKNESS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN

"A VIRTUOSO WRITER.  
A TRUE MASTER OF  
THE GENRE."

—*Fangoria*



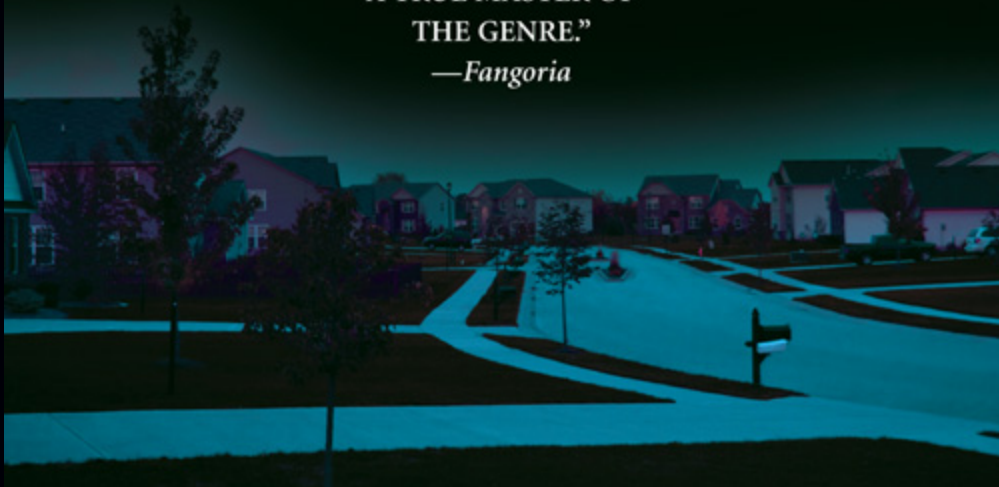
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# **Darkness on the Edge of Town**

**Brian Keene**

LEISURE BOOKS  NEW YORK CITY

## Into the Unknown

Drew took a deep breath and crossed into the darkness. It enveloped him almost immediately, and he vanished from sight. Clay followed close behind him, if somewhat reluctantly.

“Oh, damn...” Irish balked.

“Move, yo.” Stan the Man pushed him forward. Irish followed after Clay. Stan the Man stayed right behind him. He stretched out his arm and put his hand on Irish’s shoulder. Then they disappeared, too. The darkness seemed to flow over them like water.

We could hear them breathing through Cranston’s walkie-talkie. Their breathing was harsh and ragged and loud, and reminded me a little bit of Darth Vader. Clay mumbled something unintelligible. Then Drew muttered that it was cold.

Mad Mike and Olivia were next in line, but before they could pass the symbol, Drew and Clay began screaming. Cranston’s walkie-talkie emitted a blast of static, and then went dead, but we didn’t need it to hear their cries...

*For Victoria Grace, who makes the sun come out when she smiles...*

*“For behold, a darkness shall cover the earth.”*

—Book of Isaiah, 60:2

*“A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without  
any order, and where the light is darkness.”*

—Book of Job, 10:22

*“We saw the glimmer of the lamps in the darkness of the little town below.”*

—Arthur Machen, *Strange Roads*

*“The oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”*

—H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

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# CHAPTER ONE

In the beginning...

That's how stories always start, right? In the beginning? I guess mine should start that way, too.

In the beginning was the word. I know this because the Bible tells me so. The Bible tells me a lot of things. It says that Jesus loves me, and that you shouldn't suffer a witch to live, and in the beginning was the word.

Words have power. So do names.

It might sound like I'm rambling, but this is important stuff, so remember it. Names. Words. Witches. I'll come back to all of this later, if there's time. Who knows? It just might save your life. I wouldn't have believed that a month ago, but I do now. Things have changed.

My name is Robbie Higgins. There. Now you have power over me. It's Rob or Robbie to my friends. Robert to the cops or my teachers or anyone else who has ever hassled me.

Anyway, in the beginning was the word, and it existed alone in the darkness. The Bible tells us that, too—tells us about the darkness. And this wasn't just regular darkness either. No, sir. This was the complete and total absence of light—a darkness so deep and dense that it would have made your eyes hurt. A heavy darkness. Thick. At least, that's how I imagine it was. I mean, I can look out my window for inspiration and see the darkness pretty fucking clearly. I can't see much of anything else, but I can see the darkness.

According to the Bible, here's how it all went down. You've got the word and the darkness and not much else. The two of them are just sort of hanging out together. The word and the darkness, chilling together in the void. And then the word says, "Let there be Light," and there was. And things continued just fine after that, for the most part.

Then, millennia later, some asshole comes along and fucks it all up. Someone else says another word, maybe a bad word or a different word, maybe, "Let there be Darkness again," and in doing so, effectively reverses

the entire act of Creation—erasing the light. No, not just erasing it. Obliterating it. The light is fucking gone, man. Light doesn't exist anymore. And who knows? Maybe we don't either.

Christy says that we're all dead. That's her theory anyway. She says it explains everything—why the phones don't work, why there's no electricity, no contact with the outside world, no television or radio signals, why we can't see anything out there beyond the darkness and, most importantly, why nobody new has come into town since it all began, and why none of the people who went out into the darkness have returned. Christy says that we're all dead and this is limbo. Purgatory. We can't move on to Heaven or Hell, because we're trapped here. Stranded. According to Christy, this is why ghosts always hang around the place where they died—because the darkness prevents them from leaving.

The problem is, Christy does a lot of drugs—or did, up until she ran out of them—so her conclusions are kind of suspect. Now, don't get me wrong. She wasn't into the hard stuff. She never did heroin or meth or anything like that. She just loved smoking weed and enjoyed the occasional line of coke or a tab of Ecstasy. So did I, truth be told. In any case, my point is this. Scientific method is not Christy's strong suit. But I love her anyway—and not just because she's got a great set of tits. Before the darkness, she made me smile every day. She made me happy. For guys like me, that's rarer than you might think.

Christy's wrong. We're not dead. I know this because dead people don't die. And every single person who has left town since the darkness descended, every single one of us who ventured out into that black space, has ended up dead. You can't die if you're already dead. So, that means they weren't dead and they weren't ghosts. They didn't die or become a ghost until *after* they left town.

Of course, Christy disagrees with me. She says I'm just speculating. Well, fuck that noise. I *know*, man.

I know.

Sure, I didn't see them die. Not personally. I mean, you can't see anything beyond the barrier. But I *heard* them. Heard them die. I heard their screams.

And the other sounds. The sounds the darkness makes.

Sometimes it whispers. If you stand too close to it, right there on the edge where the candlelight is swallowed by shadow, the darkness talks to you in a voice not its own—a voice you’ve probably heard before. A lover. A parent. A friend.

Ghosts.

But the darkness does a lot more than just talk. If chattering was all it did, we could just put cotton in our ears and be done with it.

The darkness bites. The darkness has teeth—sharp, obsidian fangs that you can’t see. But they’re there, just the same. The darkness has teeth, and it’s waiting to chew us up until there’s nothing left. The darkness kills us if we venture out into it, and if it can do that, then we ain’t fucking dead.

Therefore, the darkness is alive, and so are we.

We don’t try to leave town anymore. Nobody does. But staying here has become a problem, too, because this town has gotten teeth of its own. The darkness is getting inside us now, and the results aren’t pretty.

We have a plan—me, Christy, and Russ. I’m a little apprehensive about it, because the last time I came up with a plan, a lot of people ended up dead as a result of it, and I became sort of a pariah afterward. That was early on in the siege. I’ve avoided trying to be a leader since then. But the three of us came up with this new idea today. It’s not necessarily a good plan, and it probably won’t work, but our options are pretty fucking limited at this point. We came up with the plan after what happened with poor Dez. That was the last straw—the final indication that things will not be returning to normal. Game fucking over, man.

Anyway, we’ll be leaving soon, but before we do, I figured maybe I should leave some kind of record. An accounting, just in case. So I’m writing it all down in this notebook, and I’ll leave it here before we take off. I guess I should tell you about everything that led to this. Tell the entire story from the beginning.

Names. Words. Witches.

Darkness.

In the beginning...

## CHAPTER TWO

I'm not sure how long we've been here because I quit looking at calendars a long time ago and my cell phone won't give me the date—or anything else. The battery is dead, and I've got no way to charge it. Before the battery died, I'd occasionally flip the phone open, scroll through my contacts, and try calling people, but it never worked. There was no recorded message telling me their numbers were out of service or one of those short beeps you get when the cell phone you're calling from is out of range of a tower. The phone didn't even ring. Each time I tried, it was like placing a call to the afterlife. All I heard was the sound of nothing.

Judging by the length of my beard and hair, I'm guessing we've been trapped here about a month, give or take a few days. I'd never had a beard before. I hated the way it felt after a few weeks—itchy and tight, and all those little ingrown hair bumps that popped up beneath it, red and swollen and full of pus. But I'm too lazy to boil water, and shaving without hot water is a fucking pain in the ass. Plus, some dickhead looted all the shaving cream from both the grocery store and the convenience store. Then, not satisfied with that, they took the shaving cream from all of the abandoned houses. Who does that? Food, batteries, and water I can understand. Hell, we took stuff, too. But in our case, it was stuff that we needed. Who takes all of the fucking shaving cream? And so methodically, too. Taking the time to go house to house and abscond with it? I mean, that's just crazy.

But there are crazy people everywhere these days, and stealing shaving cream is the least of their bizarre behavior.

Anyway, I guess it doesn't really matter how long we've been here. All that matters is how this all began and what's happened since then.

What happened was this. Early one Wednesday morning in late September, me and Christy and everyone else in the bucolic little town of Walden, Virginia, woke up and found out that the rest of the world was gone.

Not destroyed, mind you, but gone.

Just...*gone*.

Walden was still there. That hadn't changed. Our homes and stores and schools, our pets and loved ones, our cherished keepsakes and personal belongings, our streets and sidewalks—all of those still existed. But the outside world, everything beyond the town limits, had been replaced by an unbroken wall of black. A curtain of darkness surrounded the town. It stretched east and west, from the sign on Route 711 that said *You Are Now Entering Walden, Population 11,873*, to the rocky, tree-covered hills behind the senior high school, and north and south from the Texaco station on Maple Avenue, to the vacant lot behind the half-empty strip mall on Tenth Street. Everything inside that radius still existed. Everything beyond those boundaries had been swallowed up by a heavy, impenetrable darkness. It was dark inside the town limits, too, but not as thick as on the exterior. Inside Walden, it just looked like night. Out on the edge of town, the blackness seemed deeper. Denser, like congealing grease or motor oil.

Some folks didn't even notice the darkness at first. They woke up to find that the power, gas, water, and other utilities were off. That was alarming, of course. But it wasn't until they stumbled outside to see if their neighbors were having the same problem that they discovered what was really happening—except that none of us was sure just what that was.

Personally, at first, I thought it was an eclipse, but Russ nixed that idea. He said that if it had been an eclipse, he'd have known about it, and I didn't doubt that. Russ lives in the one-bedroom apartment above Christy and me. He's an amateur astronomer and before the darkness came, he spent most nights up on the roof, staring at the stars through his telescope and bitching about all the streetlamps. He said they caused light pollution and made it hard for him to see anything clearly.

These days he doesn't have to worry about light pollution anymore. The only problem is, there's nothing in the sky for him to see. The stars are gone. He says it's like staring into a pool of tar.

House by house, apartment by apartment, Walden woke up to find out that sunrise had been canceled. Their reactions were interesting. A few people insisted that it wasn't a big deal. They were convinced the darkness was just some freak weather occurrence, some bizarre atmospheric phenomenon that would dissipate in a few hours. They climbed into their cars and trucks and sport utility vehicles, and started off on the day's

commute. Other people caught one glimpse of the darkness, then panicked and decided to flee. They chalked it up to everything from a terrorist attack to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ himself, back to judge us all, and then they loaded up their cars and trucks and sped away, convinced it was the end of the world.

Here's what I don't get about either of these groups. The first group, the ones who went to work like it was just any other day—what the fuck were they thinking? I mean, how much of a fucking drone do you have to be to just go about your regular, everyday business like that, ignoring the reality of what's happening around you? Were they that consumed with their mortgage payments and promotions that they willingly just blanked out everything else, hoping that once they arrived at work, the world would right itself again? And the second group, the people who were convinced it was Judgment Day and fled—where the hell were they going? If Jesus really had come back to judge us all, were they rushing off to meet him, or were they trying to hide? If it really was the end of the world, then what possible destination did they have in mind? What place wouldn't be impacted by the planet's destruction? Think about that for a moment, because it's important. Where do you go to hide from the end of the world?

In both cases—those who took it in stride and those who freaked out—they drove out of town and into the darkness.

None of them were ever seen again.

That was how we first found out that the darkness had teeth.

Back again. I took a break from writing this and finished off the last of my whiskey. Basil Hayden's Kentucky bourbon. Christy got me a bottle of it for my birthday. Damn good stuff. Expensive as all hell, but worth every penny. I drank the last because I figured if I was going to write all this out, I should have a little bit of a buzz to get me through it. Grease the wheels, you know? Face my fears, because a lot of what I'm going to tell you is pretty fucking grim. And now my whiskey's gone.

Want to hear something funny? Even without the fact that there's no trash pickup day anymore, I'm reluctant to throw away the empty bottle. Booze is even scarcer than shaving cream these days. Walden was always a dry town, and the only place within the city limits that served liquor was the

local Knights of Columbus hall—and you had to be a member to drink there. Not surprisingly, when the looting started, one of the first things to disappear was the booze.

The Knights of Columbus got hit first, of course. Then people raided empty houses—and sometimes they broke into houses that weren't empty—and cleaned those out, too. These days, a bottle of Smirnoff or Jim Beam is better than cash.

Hell, anything is better than cash. The only thing you can do with paper money is burn it to stay warm. Doing so is more psychological than anything else because the temperature in town never fluctuates. Sometimes it just feels good to be warm. So people burn their paper money.

Liquor keeps you warm, too, and without all that annoying smoke or the risk of burning your house down while you sleep. Like I said, Jim Beam rules over the green. And coins? The only thing you can do with coins is put them in pipe bombs. They make excellent shrapnel.

But I don't want to throw the empty bottle away. I'd like to cap it, and then once in a while, I could unscrew the lid and smell the leftover vapors. Breathe what once had been. But I guess that, like everything else, they'd eventually vanish.

It's nighttime again. There's no way to tell what time of day it is, really, unless you own a battery-operated clock or a watch that still works. Daylight is a thing of the past. I'm going by my internal alarm clock, and that's telling me it's around ten o'clock at night.

I've always been a night owl. It's when I'm most awake. Alive. Part of that is because, until recently, I worked second shift at Giovanni's Pizza. The pizza parlor, a little redbrick building, used to sit just past the outskirts of town. Now it's part of the darkness. When I worked there, I came in at three in the afternoon and made deliveries until eleven most nights—later if there was something special like the Super Bowl or New Year's Eve. When my shift was finished, I was usually wide awake, jazzed up on Red Bull and coffee and Mountain Dew. So I'd stay awake until dawn, playing video games or talking to Christy if she was still awake. She usually tried to stay up until I got home, but it was tough on her. She worked part time at the little New Age shop downtown, and her shifts were generally during the day. But we made it work.

I used to love the night. The darkness was like an old friend. I embraced it. Welcomed it. Nighttime was peaceful and serene and calming. It hummed with its own energy and possibilities.

I don't feel that way anymore, and now the darkness hums with something else.

Since back in the day when we were still cavemen, wandering around picking bugs out of one another's hair and trying not to get eaten by saber-tooth tigers, mankind has been afraid of the dark. I never understood why, until now.

I'm sitting here whistling a tune by Flogging Molly and wishing there was still electricity so I could listen to my iPod. I'd fucking kill to hear some music again—something other than Cranston down on the first floor strumming away on his warped, out-of-tune guitar, or the local juvenile delinquents rapping bad hip-hop to one another around the rusty burn barrel on the sidewalk. Yeah, I could go for some Flogging Molly right now. Or Tiger Army. Or The Dropkick Murphys. A little bit of that would chase the darkness away.

No. No, it wouldn't. Who the hell am I kidding? Music's no good. The darkness would just swallow that up, too.

Okay, I've stalled long enough, and this whiskey buzz ain't gonna last forever. If I'm going to tell you about this shit, I suppose I should get down to business. Christy is sleeping in the next room, and Russ is upstairs packing for the trip. We try to avoid one another these days, so that none of us gets angry. We can't risk turning on one another, and the slightest perceived insult could easily lead to that. See, the darkness amps up our negative emotions. You might not understand that now, but you will.

There's not much time left. Soon as Christy wakes up, we're leaving.

Hopefully, we can keep the outer darkness at bay just a little bit longer.

And keep the darkness inside us at bay, as well.

## CHAPTER THREE

You know those coming-of-age books and movies? The ones where a bunch of plucky kids have all kinds of adventures during the summer, and it ends up being a major turning point in their lives? They defeat the monster, bully, bad guy, abusive parent, insert your own antagonist here, and afterward, they are changed forever as a result of that confrontation, and when they look back on it as adults, they realize how it shaped and molded them?

Yeah, you know what I'm talking about. I mean, who hasn't seen one of those movies or read one of those books? We all love that kind of story because we can all identify with it. We've all been kids, and we've all faced our own monsters.

Here's the thing about those stories, though. Ninety-nine point nine nine nine percent of the time, they take place in a small town and in a simpler time—usually the fifties or the sixties. Back when things were supposedly more gentle and innocent. I mean, it's a real slice of Americana, isn't it? All you need to do is add some baseball and apple pie. Coming-of-age stories are supposed to represent America at its core—everything that is good and decent and moral about us as a nation.

But they're not really all that accurate anymore, are they? In those stories, everybody knows everyone else in town. People say hello when they pass one another on the street. The town has a real sense of history—the populace knows who founded it and when and why, and all the things that have happened there since. Can you say the same thing about where you live?

Before all of this, Walden wasn't like that. Yes, we were your stereotypical small town, but we were also a town of strangers. I can count on two hands the number of people I actually knew here. Christy and Russ. Cranston downstairs. My boss at the pizza place and the other delivery drivers. And Dez. But Dez doesn't count because everyone in Walden knew who he was. You couldn't miss him. He was the only homeless guy in town—by choice, really. Because of that, everyone knew Dez. He was the exception.

In Walden you didn't stop and talk to people on the street about the events in your lives. Oh sure, maybe you nodded, acknowledging their presence. Maybe you even commented on the weather or asked for the time of day. But that was all. There was no five-and-dime store selling chocolate malts or comic books off a squeaky spinner rack. No kindly pharmacist dispensing medicine and grandfatherly advice in equal measure. No mom-and-pop stores of any kind because those were a thing of the past. The only things that existed in Walden were the same cardboard-cutout chain stores you found in every other American town—Wal-Mart, Kmart, McDonald's, Best Buy, Burger King, Staples, Red Lobster, Bath & Body Works, Barnes & Noble, Bass Pro Shops, Target, Subway, and a Starbucks on every corner. That might seem like a lot for a population of just over eleven thousand, but there were other small towns nearby and we'd become their hub. The only independently owned businesses in town, other than the new age health-food store and the comic book shop, were the Lutheran, Methodist, and Catholic churches—and they didn't see much traffic.

I bet it was the same everywhere in America. Those old coming-of-age stories are a lie.

Fire-hall bean suppers and pancake breakfasts weren't the hub of social activity, and families didn't gather around the dinner table or the television because the kids were online and the parents were divorced or working two jobs. At traffic lights, drivers were unknown to the motorists in other cars. A yellow signal meant speed up rather than slow down. Doctors didn't make house calls because the insurance companies wouldn't let them. The local waitresses didn't know their customers' names or ask them if they wanted the "usual." Kids didn't ride their bikes all over town or build forts in the woods because parents didn't let their kids do things like that anymore. In the twenty-first century, your next-door neighbor was somebody you didn't know, and they might have been a child molester or a serial killer, so you let your kids stray as far as the backyard, and even then, it was under your watchful eye.

Isn't it strange? Before the darkness, this was supposed to be the information age. People talked about the planet being a global fucking village. We lived in a world where you could hop online and play chess with some guy in Australia or have virtual sex with a woman you'd never met and never *would* meet because she lived in Scotland—and maybe, just

maybe, she wasn't even a woman but a dude pretending to be female. But despite breaking down all those social and global barriers, more than ever, we were a nation of strangers. Of secrets. We knew somebody online who we'd never met in person. Knew them by their screen name and their avatar, and called them a friend, but we didn't know the people who lived next door. We hung out with people on message boards rather than at the bar. We didn't drop off apple pies when our neighbors were sick or compare lawn-mowing techniques over the white picket fence. We didn't know what our neighbors were up to behind closed doors or what they were really like in private.

Until the darkness came. Then everybody unmasked. Everybody showed their real faces because it just didn't matter anymore. And in most cases, their real faces were ugly and monstrous. Not evil. Not really. Evil is too strong of a word. Evil is nothing more than an idea, a moniker we use to describe things that are otherwise indescribable. Anytime we can't explain a person's actions, we attribute them to evil. But all the shit that went down after the darkness came—calling it evil would have been too easy. It was brutal and savage, but it wasn't evil. It was just humans being. Like that? Pretty clever, if I do say so myself. Gallows fucking humor.

But it's true. All the rapes and murders and arson and everything else that's happened since the darkness arrived—it was all just humans being human. People reverting back to type. Turning primitive. Devolving back to how we behaved when we were still afraid of the dark. It didn't happen right away. At first we were all too scared, and we still had hope. But by the first long night, when that hope ran out and all we had left was fear, things went downhill quick.

I can't tell you what everyone else did because I don't know their stories. I can only tell you what happened to us. What we saw and heard and experienced ourselves.

In the beginning.

I went to bed late that morning—around three A.M.—because I'd been wrapped up in playing a video game. Christy was in the living room watching Headline News and eating a bowl of cereal. She'd just smoked some weed. I remember drifting off to the smell of her bong smoke wafting into the bedroom from beneath the closed door and the distant drone of the

television. One of the anchors was prattling on about ten new fashions or some such bullshit, and I was wondering how that qualified as news. Then I fell asleep.

She woke me a few hours later. I was groggy and grumpy, and it took me a while to actually open my eyes. She kept shaking me, insisting that I get up. When I finally did, I became alert pretty fast. There was something in Christy's tone that alarmed me. She sounded worried. Not scared. Being scared came later. But she was definitely concerned about something.

I sat up and rubbed my bleary eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Outside," she said, breathless. "You've got to see it."

"What?"

"Just hurry!" She jumped up and ran out of the room.

Yawning, I climbed out of bed and scratched my balls. I heard a few car horns honking outside and voices raised in concern, but no sirens or alarms or anything. I sniffed the air but didn't smell smoke.

"This better be worth it, Christy."

She didn't respond.

Our second-floor apartment is pretty small, and there's not much room between the bed and our dresser. I banged my hip against the side of the dresser and cursed. I hated that fucking thing. I fumbled for the lamp, knocking over an empty beer bottle, an open roll of quarters, and Christy's incense burner. The coins clattered to the floor and the bottle clinked against the wall. I clicked the lamp's switch, but nothing happened. Then I noticed the digital clock on the nightstand. It was blank. Not flashing but blank. The power was out. I figured that maybe a car had hit a pole outside our building or something.

I grabbed a pair of sweatpants out of the hamper. Christy had tossed a wet bath towel on top of them. They were damp and smelled musty, but I put them on anyway because they were cleaner than anything else in the apartment. We were overdue for a trip to the Laundromat. I remember that clearly because we never got the chance. We've done laundry a few times since then—washing our clothes with dishwashing detergent and a bucket of water from the pond behind the fire company. But that pond is drying up now, and what little water is left in it has grown stagnant and reeks like raw sewage. There's been no rain since the darkness arrived. Mosquitoes hover around the pond in clouds, and a thin coat of green slime covers the surface.

Wearing dirty clothes has become more preferable—at least to those of us who don't wander the streets naked and howling, like some have taken to doing.

Barefoot, I shuffled out into our tiny living room. Two small candles flickered on the coffee table, filling the apartment with the scent of lilac and lavender. Christy peered out the window. She was wearing one of my old T-shirts and a pair of panties, but she didn't seem concerned that someone on the street might see her. Her eyes were wide, and her upper lip quivered. One hand was over her breast.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is someone hurt?"

Without looking at me, she said, "It's dark."

I blinked, trying to figure out why that mattered. "Well, what time is it?"

"I don't know. Almost seven, I think. The sun should be up by now."

"Maybe it's gonna rain. Didn't the weatherman say we were supposed to have thunderstorms all week long?"

She didn't respond. I crossed over to the window and stood beside her. I put my arm around her, trying to shed my annoyance at being woken up. That was when I noticed that she was trembling. It wasn't just her lip. Her entire body was shaking.

"It shouldn't be this dark," she said. "Look at the sky. There's no moon or sun. No clouds. Nothing. The electricity is off. So is the phone. I turned on the faucet in the kitchen, but there's no water pressure."

"Is the radio saying anything?"

We had a battery-powered unit in the kitchen—one of those kind that plays compact discs and cassettes, as well as having an AM/FM dial.

"There's nothing on it. No signals. Not even static. It's just...quiet."

I glanced outside. It was indeed dark. The only source of illumination was the headlights of passing cars and the soft glow of candles from a few windows. Some people were on the street, pointing at the sky and shouting. Others stood silently, just staring at the horizon. Frowning, I grabbed my wristwatch off the entertainment center.

"It's twenty after seven," I said. "You're right. It should definitely be light outside."

Christy nodded. I pulled her away from the window, and we sat down on the couch. I drew her close to me and held her while she trembled.

“What happened?” I asked. “When did it start?”

“A little while ago. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes. I was watching *The Today Show*. The signal disappeared while they were interviewing that rapper Prosper Johnson.”

“What’d he do now?”

“He held a party to unveil his new clothing line, and somebody took a shot at him. The police have no suspects. Anyway, that Asian girl on *The Today Show* was talking to him, and then a few seconds later, the power went out. I noticed how dark it was in here and opened the blinds and saw what was going on outside. I tried calling the power company, but the phone was dead. Then I tried using my cell phone, but it’s not working either. I can’t even call my mom.”

Christy’s mother lived in a trailer park the next town over—about half an hour away. At the time, I assured Christy that her mom was okay. Of course, we know better now.

“And you said you tried the radio?”

She nodded. “It’s dead, too.”

“Stay here.”

I got up and stumbled through the darkness into the kitchen. I yanked open a drawer and pulled out some more candles and a flashlight. Then I tried the radio for myself, making sure it was working properly. It was. The batteries weren’t dead. The little red power light glowed. But there was nothing but dead air. I made my way back to the living room and lit the candles, placing them strategically throughout the room. The flames seemed to beat back the shadows, and the room didn’t feel as small anymore. It seemed to affect Christy’s mood as well. She stopped trembling and even managed a weak smile.

“You haven’t done anything romantic like this in a long time.”

I returned her smile and gave her a kiss. We sat there together for a few minutes, listening to the sounds from the street.

“Maybe it’s an eclipse,” I said. “I should ask Russ. He’d know.”

“He probably left for work already.”

“Well, I’m gonna go downstairs and have a look.”

Christy put her hand on my leg and squeezed. Her tone became worried again.

“No, stay here. Don’t go outside. We don’t know what’s happening.”

“It’ll be okay.”

“What if it’s a terrorist attack or something? A nuke?”

I sighed. “If it was a nuke we probably wouldn’t be here right now. And if it was some other kind of bomb, we’d have seen the explosion or heard it at least.”

“Not if it was far away.”

“Just stay here. I’ll be fine. I promise, I’ll come right back, soon as I find out what’s going on.”

Reluctantly, she agreed. I pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of socks, and slipped into my shoes.

“Take your keys,” Christy said. “I’m locking the door behind you.”

I thought she was being paranoid, but I kept it to myself. Clutching the flashlight, I walked downstairs. Each stair creaked underfoot. I paused by Cranston’s door, but his apartment was quiet.

Outside, things were pretty much like I already described. Some folks behaved normally. Others freaked out. I guess that I was somewhere between the two extremes. I didn’t flip, but I knew things weren’t normal either. One glance at the sky proved that.

The sky was gone. No sun. No clouds. No planes or birds. There was nothing—just blackness. Same thing with the horizon. I should have been able to see mountains in the distance, cell phone towers and things like that, but again, there was nothing. It looked like someone had put Walden inside a bottle, then draped a black sheet over it.

A man tapped me on the shoulder. I didn’t know his name, but I recognized his face. He lived in the apartment building next to ours. I’d seen him going in and out a few times.

“Pretty spooky, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “You can say that again. Do you know what’s going on?”

“Beats me. I woke up and it was like this. They were calling for rain last night before I went to bed. Supposed to be a really bad thunderstorm this morning. Maybe this is it? Some kind of weird storm front?”

“Maybe.” I glanced up at the sky. “But then how come it’s not raining? How come there’s no thunder or lightning? There’s not even a breeze. Feel that? The air is completely still.”

“Good point.” He stuck out his hand. “Tom Salvo.”

“Robbie Higgins.”

I shook his hand and marveled over how surreal the whole situation was. It took some bizarre shit like this for people to act all polite and civilized to each other.

“Nice to meet you, Robbie. You and your girlfriend live upstairs, right?”

“Yeah, second floor. You live next door, right?”

He nodded. “Been there a year, ever since my wife and I separated. It’s small, but I can’t afford much else. Not with child support and everything. I’ve got two kids. Boy and a girl. They live with their mother, and I see them every other weekend.”

Now that he’d mentioned it, I remembered seeing two children going in and out of the building with him occasionally.

We made small talk for a while. Every few minutes, someone else would stop and ask us if we knew what was happening. Some of them wandered away when they found out we didn’t. Others stayed. One guy who lived across the street brought out a thermos full of hot coffee and some disposable cups and shared them with the group. He’d made a pot of coffee before the power went out and dumped it in the thermos before it could cool. It tasted really good. Minutes passed and our little street corner coffee klatch grew to a dozen. I didn’t know any of them, but that didn’t stop us from talking.

A car horn blared, startling us all.

The driver shouted, “Get out of the fucking street, asshole!”

We turned our attention to the commotion. Dez dodged cars in the middle of the intersection. His raggedy, tattered clothes whirled around him like a cape, making him look like a scarecrow. He smiled and nodded and made apologetic gestures, and received obscene finger gestures in return.

“That’s the homeless guy, right?” Tom asked.

“Yeah,” someone else answered. “Goddamn weirdo.”

“He’s schizophrenic,” a woman said. “The poor man deserves our pity.”

“He ain’t schizophrenic,” said an overweight man who stank of cigars. “He’s batshit fucking crazy.”

“I feel sorry for him,” the woman insisted. “He lives in the abandoned utility shed across from the Lutheran church. He won’t let anybody help him. We’ve tried to take him food before, but he refuses it.”

The fat man rolled his eyes. “Like I said, lady, he’s fucking nuts. He don’t want to eat? Fuck him, I say.”

We watched Dez negotiate traffic. He reminded me of that Frogger video game. I breathed a little sigh of relief when he reached the curb. I’d seen him around many times but never up close like this. His age was hard to determine, but he was younger than I’d expected. I guessed that he was somewhere in his thirties. His thick beard was untidy but clean, and his hair, while uncombed, seemed clean as well. In fact, with the exception of his clothes, which looked like they could stand up by themselves, Dez seemed to be in pretty good shape. There was a bulge in the pocket of his trench coat—the unmistakable outline of a pint of booze. He smiled as he passed by us, walking slowly, as if exhausted.

“I did it,” he said to us, still grinning. “I didn’t think I’d finish in time, but I did. I kept it out. We’ll be okay, as long as nobody erases them.”

Our group smiled and nodded, shifting uneasily. Nobody was sure how to respond. Some of us glanced away. Others stared at each other. One person laughed.

“It can’t come in,” Dez told us. “You just have to know the words. It’s a good thing I had them in one of my books, or else it would have gobbled us all up like jelly beans. Little human jelly beans. What flavor are you?”

Tom cleared his throat. The others remained silent.

I spoke slowly, as if speaking to a child. “What are you talking about, man?”

“The darkness. Somebody said its real name and invited it into our world. I knew it was coming, so I wrote the words and stopped it. I don’t know how to make it go away, though. I don’t know how to close the door.”

Dez wandered on up the street and disappeared around the corner. Our group started to break up then. Confronted with too much weirdness, we were back to being strangers again. If this was the apocalypse, then we each had our own personal version to attend to.

Plus we were all out of hot coffee.

Tom clapped me on the shoulder. “Nice meeting you, Robbie.”

“Yeah, man. You too. I hope your kids are okay.”

“Me too. I...”

He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. His throat bobbed, and his eyes glistened.

“Keep in touch,” I offered. “Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. And I will. See you.”

“Yeah, man. See you around.”

I went back inside our building. It was very quiet, and the stairwell seemed spookier than before. I took a deep breath. My stomach grumbled, and I thought about getting something to eat—end of the world or not.

I saw Tom Salvo twice after that. The first time, it was only briefly. The second time I saw him again, he was dead.

## CHAPTER FOUR

On my way back up the stairs, I decided to check and see if Russ was home. Sure, he should have left for work already, but there was a chance he'd decided not to after seeing what was going on outside. If so, maybe he could offer an explanation for what was happening. Some small part of me still held out hope that this was just some sort of freak eclipse. My stomach rumbled again, but I figured it could wait a little bit longer.

I passed our door and went up one more flight of steps. Russ's apartment was quiet. I rapped on the door and waited. There was no answer and no movement from inside, so I knocked again. When there was still no answer, I went back downstairs.

Christy was still huddled on the couch with her feet curled up under her. When I came in, she looked up at me and I could tell she'd been crying.

"Did you find out anything?"

"No," I said, and sat down beside her. The couch springs squeaked. "No one knows what the hell is going on. Everybody has theories, and some of them are pretty wild—aliens, the Rapture, shit like that—but nobody knows for sure what's happened."

"What did you see?"

I shrugged. "The same thing we can see from the window. Darkness. The only difference is that there's more of it outside. You ever watch Superman cartoons when you were a kid?"

"Yeah."

"Remember Kandor?"

"The giant ape with Superman's powers?"

"No, that wasn't Kandor. I can't remember what his name was."

"Gigantor?"

"No, that wasn't it. Doesn't matter anyway. Whatever his name was, that ape was a lame-ass villain. Kandor was that miniature city in a bottle that Superman kept in his Fortress of Solitude."

Christy nodded. "Oh, yeah. I remember that now."

“Well, that’s how it felt outside. Like Walden’s been stuck inside a bottle and somebody turned the lights out on us.”

She rubbed her arms and shivered. “It’s chilly in here.”

“Yeah, it is. I could use some coffee. Some guy down on the street gave me a cup, but I could use more. I wish the power was on.”

“We have that little jar of instant that my mom brought over before we got the coffee maker, but I don’t know how we’d heat the water.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “Maybe a little later. Bad as I need it, I hate drinking cold coffee.”

Christy got up and pulled on a pair of sweatpants. When she returned to the living room, she draped a blanket over her shoulders and sat back down again. She fired up the bong, and we smoked for a while. Then I told her about everything I’d learned, the people I’d met, and Dez’s bizarre behavior. While we talked, the noise out on the street increased, as more people woke up and discovered what was going on.

“Did any of the other people say what they were going to do?”

“A few,” I said. “Some of them were talking about leaving, trying to get to one of the other towns and see if they had power or knew what was going on. Some of the others were just going to stay put. I think that’s what we should do, too. Just sit tight and wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“I don’t know. For the utilities to come back on, at least. I mean, we don’t really know anything at this point, right? We don’t know if it’s safe to leave or not.”

“We should go to my mom’s place. Maybe her power is still on. Maybe the news is saying something.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, hon. I know you’re worried about her, but she’d want you to stay safe, and I think we have a better chance of keeping you that way if we stay here.”

“You really think something terrible has happened?”

“Maybe. I thought it was an eclipse, but they don’t normally last this long. I’m not saying it was something bad for sure, but let’s say it was indeed some kind of terrorist attack or natural disaster. Maybe the darkness is some kind of chemical cloud or something, or a volcanic plume. If we go into it, we could get sick.”

“Do you think that’s what happened? Al Qaeda? The Sons of the Constitution? They haven’t done anything since they killed all those people on that reality show. Oh God, what if it’s them?”

“I just said that I wasn’t saying that for sure, Christy. But whatever it is, we have to assume it’s dangerous. All the utilities are gone, and people are scared. That leads to panic, and if people are freaking the fuck out, the last place we want to be is on the road. So let’s just chill out and wait to see what happens. Help might show up. And if not, in a few hours, we’ll figure out what to do next. Okay?”

“Okay.” She pouted.

I headed into the kitchen and decided to make us both something to eat. I didn’t want to open the refrigerator door and let the cold air out, because there was no telling how long the power would be out and I didn’t want our food to go bad, so I settled on some dried fruit and a box of Cheerios from the cupboard. I mixed them together into cereal bowls for each of us and carried them back into the living room.

“We’ll have to eat them without milk,” I said. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

Christy’s dejected tone was gone. It felt good to see her smile again. It was a little victory, but an important one for me. In truth, I was starting to get a little scared. As males, we’re sort of genetically programmed to protect our significant others. When we don’t succeed, it’s a terrible feeling. You feel helpless and not worthy of their love, even if they don’t feel that way about you themselves. I wanted Christy to be safe, but I didn’t know what I was protecting her from or how to do it. I think it was the not knowing that was the worst. If I’d just known what was going on and what we were dealing with, then I could have handled it. I could have done whatever I needed to for us. But not knowing, there wasn’t really any way to prepare. All I could do was try to keep Christy happy and content. Just keep her mind off things and hope that the situation would soon pass.

But it didn’t pass.

We were crunching away on our breakfast when somebody knocked on the door. The rapping sound was very loud, and we both jumped a little. I spilled a few Cheerios on the couch.

“Stay here,” I told her, and set my bowl on the coffee table.

Christy frowned. Her eyebrows knitted together the way they did when she was scared or nervous. I paused, reached out with my finger and brushed a piece of cereal from the corner of her mouth. That made her smile.

The knock came again as I crossed the room. It was more insistent this time. I heard a muffled voice calling my name. Whoever it was, they sounded excited. I peeked through the peephole and saw Russ's magnified face staring back at me. I opened the door.

His face was red. "Oh, thank Christ you're home. You guys been outside yet?"

"Yeah, I went out earlier." I opened the door the rest of the way. "Come on in, man."

"Thanks."

Russ looked like something the cat had mauled, eaten, spit up, eaten again, crapped out, and *then* dragged in. His thinning hair was sticking up in wild, greasy corkscrews, and his eyes were bleary and blood-shot. Salt-and-pepper stubble covered his cheeks. His jeans were dirty, and there was a big yellow mustard stain on his white T-shirt. His shoes were untied. Worst of all was the smell coming out his pores—stale sweat and alcohol. Even though I tried to hide it, he must have noticed my reaction because he apologized right away.

"Sorry. I tied one on last night and overslept. I know I probably look like shit. Woke up with one hell of a hangover. How's your plumbing? I wanted to take a shower, but mine's not working."

"Nothing is working," I said. "All the utilities are out."

"Shit. I figured that might be it. Was hoping maybe I was wrong, though. I noticed the phone was out when I tried to call off work. And then...well, I guess you looked outside too, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "We saw it. Christy's pretty freaked out. To be honest, I'm getting that way myself. At first I thought maybe it was an eclipse or something. Now I don't know what the hell is going on."

"It's not an eclipse," Russ confirmed, "or any other astronomical event that I can think of. There are a few things that would account for something like this, but I'd know if they were supposed to be occurring—and they're not. So unless the sun suddenly burned out..." Smiling, he shrugged. "Well,

if that happened, we wouldn't be standing here talking about it, would we? My point is, we have to look somewhere other than the sky for the answer."

"We can't see the sky anyway."

"No, I guess we can't."

"Well," I said, "have a seat. I'd offer you some coffee, but all we have is that instant crap. There's cereal if you want some."

"That's okay. What I need is some hair of the dog."

I grinned. "What were you drinking last night?"

"Cheap tequila."

"We've got that, too. And a little bit of bud."

"Budweiser?"

"No, weed."

Russ nodded. "Maybe in a bit."

He joined Christy and me in the living room, and we filled him in on what we'd learned. Russ asked if we had any aspirin, and Christy gave him two. He swallowed them dry, grimacing as they slid down his throat. After a while, we tried the radio again, but there were still no broadcasts. The commotion down on the street had lessened somewhat, as people either returned to their homes or got the hell out of Dodge. The candles on the coffee table sputtered as the flames reached the bottoms of the wicks, and I replaced them with fresh ones.

"If this goes on too long," Christy said, "we'll run out of candles."

"If this goes on too long," Russ replied, "we're going to run out of a *lot* of things. You guys use your toilets yet?"

I tried not to chuckle. "Why?"

"Conserve water. Unless they get the pipes working, that might be all you got."

"I think that's a little far-fetched," I said. "Whatever this is, it's not going to go on *that* long. If it's really bad, sure, it might be a few days. But even then, there's plenty of bottled water at the stores."

Christy made a gagging noise. "I'm not drinking out of the toilet. That's gross."

Before Russ could respond, the fire siren croaked to life. I say croaked because it's old and slow, and it has to build itself up before you can really hear it. At first, all you hear is this choppy, staccato grumble. Then it turns into a low whine before it finally starts to wail. Our volunteer fire

department always needs money, and they hold a lot of fundraisers, but so far, they hadn't invested those funds into a new siren. At least we had a fire department, though. We didn't have an ambulance corps or a police force and contracted out to other towns for both. Even if we'd had our own police department, I don't guess it would have mattered. Not now, with everything that's happened. If we'd had cops running around, people would have just started dying sooner.

The siren built to its crescendo and didn't stop. The shrill, bleating wail drowned out the noise from the street. All three of us rushed to the window and looked toward the firehouse, but we couldn't see the building. It was too dark. The people on the sidewalks were gazing in that direction, too. There weren't many cars left on the street, but the ones that were pulled over to the curb as a fire truck cruised slowly by. Its lights rotated, throwing red and blue flashes against the buildings. The interior light was on inside the cab. I caught a glimpse of the driver. He seemed haggard and scared. A man sat perched on top of the truck, holding a battery-powered bullhorn to his mouth.

**"WE ARE UNDER A STATE OF EMERGENCY. PLEASE REMAIN CALM. THE SITUATION IS FLUID BUT UNDER CONTROL. AGAIN, WE ASK THAT YOU PLEASE REMAIN CALM. ALL RESIDENTS OF WALDEN ARE ASKED TO ASSEMBLE AT THE FIREHOUSE IN HALF AN HOUR. REFRESHMENTS WILL BE PROVIDED."**

That last part seemed bizarre and comedic, and I chuckled. If you wanted people to turn out for your event, even during the end of the world, then you had to make sure that refreshments were provided. I wondered if they'd be holding a raffle as well.

The people on the street watched the fire truck roll by. Some of them shouted questions at the man with the bullhorn, but he simply repeated the message. Then the truck made a left turn, and the siren sounded again.

Christy, Russ, and I sat back down again. Christy clutched my hand hard enough to make my fingers grate together. We listened to the siren until it faded.

"You heard what he said, Robbie," Christy whispered. "A state of emergency."

"Yeah." I nodded. "I guess we should head for the firehouse and see what's going on."

Russ stood. "Before we do, if you don't mind and you're still offering, I'll take a shot of that tequila."

I glanced at Christy and then back at Russ.

"Hell," I said, shrugging, "maybe we should all do a shot."

I poured three shots, and we downed them in silence, not offering a phony "cheers" because there was nothing to be cheery about. I grimaced as the tequila hit the back of my throat. It sat in my stomach like acidic sludge. I burped, cringing at the aftertaste. Russ helped himself to a second shot.

"Thanks," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"No problem, dude."

While I put the shot glasses in the sink, Christy reached for the bong. Her hands were shaking as she fired it up.

So were mine.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Russ grabbed a flashlight from his apartment, and Christy and I both had ours as well. We walked down the stairs and out into the dark street, and things seemed even weirder than before. It was midmorning, and the sun certainly should have been up. Instead, the sky seemed darker than ever. It made me wonder whether this was how those people in Alaska felt. You know, the ones who live where it's nighttime for a month out of the year? If it was anything like this, then it must have sucked balls.

Cranston shuffled out of his apartment, blinking like a sleepy lizard, and joined us. It turned out that he'd heard the siren, too. The noise had woken him. Cranston was our downstairs neighbor. He was in his early sixties—an ex-hippie and lifelong champion of liberal ideals. He played guitar and practiced transcendental meditation. He was a decent neighbor. Didn't bother us. Was always friendly. His guitar strumming got to be a little too much sometimes, but Christy and I didn't mind. When it annoyed us, we just turned the stereo or the television up a little louder and drowned out the noise.

Russ, Christy, and I nodded at Cranston as he shut his apartment door behind him. He didn't say much. Just asked us if we knew what was going on. We said that we didn't. His curly gray hair was sticking up in every direction, and his Grateful Dead shirt looked like he'd slept in it. I guessed that was probably what he'd done.

When we got outside, he seemed momentarily stunned by the situation. He stared up at the darkness, muttering to himself. Then he turned to the three of us.

"That's some strange shit, man."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It's pretty fucked up."

Cranston shrugged. Then he offered us a joint, and we all declined, if somewhat regretfully. Emergency or not, it seemed risky to smoke weed in the middle of the street. Plus we already had a good buzz going from the tequila and the bong. We watched Cranston puff the joint down to the roach. The tip glowed orange in the gloom. Christy licked her lips, gazing at the

joint like a man in the desert dying of thirst who suddenly spots a watering hole. She's always been like that. Smokes some weed and then wants more ten minutes later. Me, I'm good for hours. I thought she was going to tell Cranston that she'd changed her mind and ask for a toke, but she didn't. She just shifted her weight from foot to foot and tugged at her ear. She was obviously nervous and tense.

We all were.

When the joint was spent, Cranston tossed the roach onto the sidewalk and crushed it beneath his heel. He ground his foot back and forth. I felt a pang when that tiny spark of light was extinguished.

"Think the firemen have figured out what's going on?" Cranston asked.

"Let's hope so," I replied.

Russ suggested that we drive to the meeting, but I talked him out of it. We could see more if we walked, and I was curious to find out everything I could about our current situation. Apparently, a lot of other folks felt the same way. There weren't many cars or trucks on the streets, but there were lots of pedestrians. A crowd of people headed toward the firehouse, and the four of us fell in with the procession. All the people around us were strangely silent. Despite our numbers, nobody spoke much, and when they did, it was in hushed whispers. I glanced around for familiar faces but didn't see anybody I actually knew—just a few people I recognized from earlier that morning. Tom Salvo was among them, but he was too far away to really talk to. I nodded at him, and he nodded back. There was no sign of Dez the homeless guy, but I hadn't really expected there to be. He definitely seemed to march to the beat of his own drum, and somehow I doubted an emergency community powwow was his sort of scene.

Unfortunately, we didn't see much along the way that shed any light on our predicament.

Damn, I guess that was a bad pun, wasn't it? Fuck it.

Candles and lanterns burned in a few windows, but most of the buildings were dark and silent. Muffled voices drifted from a few. Sobs from a few others. One house echoed with wild, maniacal laughter. It gave me goose bumps, and I think it disturbed quite a few other people in the crowd, but nobody went to investigate it. We heard violent shouting and the sound of glass breaking inside the two-story apartment on the corner of

Pine Street, but no one moved to investigate that either. In truth, those things were a common enough occurrence at that address even before the darkness came. A bunch of white-trash meth-heads lived there. On boring Friday nights, we used to go down to the corner and bet on how long it would take for the cops to show up in response to a domestic-disturbance call.

A gray and white cat knocked over a garbage can in an alley, then ran away. A few dogs barked at us from their backyards or from inside homes. Smoke curled from several chimneys, and I found myself wishing that Christy and I had a fireplace in our apartment. It was chilly, and I had a feeling that the longer the sun was gone, the colder it would get. We passed by an enterprising teenager selling bottled water and cans of soda at five bucks a pop. He sat in a lawn chair, and the drinks were in a foam container between his feet. There was no ice inside. He was bundled up in a winter coat. The dudes who ran the Blockbuster store didn't seem concerned about the morning chill. They had the doors propped open to let in the breeze, and some hip-hop song that I didn't recognize drifted out into the road. They must have had a battery-powered CD player or something.

Not everyone was armed with a flashlight or candles, and I heard several people stumble and trip in the darkness. Feet shuffled all around us. At one point, many of us jumped at something that might have been a gunshot or a car backfiring or just somebody fucking around with fireworks. There was some nervous laughter when the sound wasn't repeated. Still, despite all that, most people didn't speak. We walked all that way in silence.

The guys at the firehouse had their gas-powered generator cranked up, and they'd set up emergency lights in the parking lot. The dazzling glow beckoned us from far off, and as we neared it, I had to shield my eyes against the glare for a moment. After walking so long in the shadows, the brilliance was almost blinding. Once we were safely under the lights, the crowd's spirits noticeably improved. It was like somebody had flipped a switch. Voices grew louder. A few people even joked and laughed with one another. It felt more like a pep rally or a community yard sale than an emergency meeting—until you saw people's faces and looked into their eyes. Then it all hit home.

All of them, regardless of their demeanor, kept glancing out at the edge of town, looking for lights, the sun, an airplane, or anything that was normal.

The big ladder truck was parked in front of the building, and a guy I assumed was the fire chief clambered up on top of the cab. He was a big guy and no doubt working on a heart attack or diabetes—or both. He moved slowly, and I could hear him wheezing even over the noise of the crowd. The fire truck's roof groaned, buckling under his feet, but it held. The movement startled him though, and the chief gave a small, strangled cry as it dimpled beneath him. A few people in the throng giggled, and his face turned red. There was a sound system hooked up next to the fire truck. Another fireman fooled around with it, conducting a sound test. It reminded me of a roadie setting up before a concert.

“Freebird,” somebody in the crowd shouted.

“Shut the fuck up, asshole,” someone else responded.

The man atop the ladder truck waited about ten minutes longer, and the parking lot continued to fill with people. Russ made a joke about the refreshments, wondering where they were and if there was enough to feed everybody. Cranston made a joke about Jesus and loaves and fishes. I just kept quiet, holding on to Christy's hand and surveying the crowd. If I'd had to guess, I'd have said that about a little less than half of the town's population was there, which made sense, given the number of people who had gone to work. Still, it was a lot of people, more than I'd ever seen gathered at one time in Walden, even counting the annual firemen's carnival, which was always held in the very spot where we were all milling around.

Eventually, the big guy on top of the fire engine must have decided there were enough people present. He raised a microphone to his lips and cleared his throat. There was a squeal of electronic feedback. The other fireman adjusted the sound system. The feedback faded, and the crowd fell silent, waiting.

“Thank you all for coming—”

“Speak up,” a woman shouted.

“Can't hear you in the back,” someone else added.

He tried again, this time more forcefully. “Thank you all for coming. I know that you're all probably just as spooked as we are right now, so I

appreciate the effort. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Seymour Peters, and I'm the fire chief for Walden."

Christy squeezed my hand hard, and I turned to look at her. She trembled with suppressed laughter. Grinning, I mouthed the guy's name.

"Seymour Peters," Russ whispered. "See more peters. Jesus Christ! His parents must have really hated him."

Christy snickered harder. It made me feel good to see her laughing after the morning's strangeness. Cranston was shaking with silent mirth as well. His shoulders jiggled up and down.

"As I'm sure you're all aware," Chief Peters continued, "we've had something of a situation this morning. Heck, I guess you can look around and see for yourself that something's happened. Unfortunately, we don't know what that something is."

"Succinctly put," a man standing near us grumbled. "Tell us something we don't know."

A rumble went through the crowd as people began to share their opinions and theories. The chief held up his hands and pleaded for silence, and they slowly fell quiet again. Before he spoke again, the Chief coughed several times—dry, rasping, and forceful. I made him for a smoker.

"What we *do* know," he continued, "is that our community has lost all of our utilities. We've tried contacting fire stations and emergency services in nearby towns, but so far we've had no luck. Cell phones and land lines aren't functioning. There are no incoming signals of any kind, including television and radio. That applies to all cable and satellite signals as well. There's nothing on the emergency or citizen's band channels either, and the ham radio frequencies have also gone silent. My men tell me that the internet is down, too. Have any of you spoken with anyone from the outside since this morning? Friends or family? Maybe a coworker? Delivery person? Anyone like that?"

Nobody raised a hand or volunteered that they had. The chief nodded. His expression was grim.

"Some of you probably had—I mean *have*—loved ones who went to work or traveled outside the town limits. Have any of you heard from them since they departed? Have any of them come back?"

Again, nobody in the crowd volunteered that they had.

“The crew and I have been discussing our situation. Now understand, we live here, too, and some of us have got loved ones missing as well. So believe me when I tell you that we understand what you’re going through. That being said, we think it’s best if everyone stays in their home for the time being. It’s dark out here, and we don’t need people wandering the streets. I know it’s probably tempting to search for your families, but doing so right now is only going to create more problems. We ask that you remain indoors until we are able to better determine exactly what has happened.”

“Fuck that noise,” somebody yelled.

The chief broke into another coughing fit. The fireman manning the sound system handed him a bottle of water. He accepted it eagerly, unscrewed the cap, and sipped. Then he faced the crowd again.

“I know it’s not an easy thing to ask, but I’m asking just the same. It’s for your safety, as well as the safety of my men.”

“It’s them terrorists, isn’t it? It’s the Al Qaeda?”

I recognized the speaker from earlier. She was the woman who had felt sorry for Dez.

“We don’t know what it is,” the chief responded. “But we intend to find out. Let’s not jump to any conclusions yet. We’ve decided to send a crew to the next town, Verona, to see if they can determine what’s happened and how large of an area this thing has affected. The plain truth is that we don’t know if this is a national, regional, or localized event. Meanwhile, the main thing we all need to do is remain calm. Panic leads to injury, and with the phones out, you have no way of calling 911. I would also like to suggest that we conserve our resources until we better understand our situation. Once the men have returned, we’ll inform all of you—probably by calling another meeting or going door-to-door. So until then, just stay put and again, remain calm. We’re doing our best, and we thank you in advance for your cooperation and patience. We’ll get through this together.”

“What a crock of shit,” a bald man in front of us muttered. “Who the hell put this guy in charge? He doesn’t know any more than the rest of us.”

“Hey,” Russ said, tapping him on the shoulder. “Why don’t you cut him some slack? The man is just trying his best.”

The bald man scowled. “I heard you snickering at his name.”

“Maybe,” Russ admitted, “but that doesn’t mean I question his authority. If he’s got a plan—and it sounds to me like he does—then I say

we respect it.”

“Who cares what you say? What—you know him or something?”

“No. I don’t know him. I don’t know you either. I’m just saying that maybe we ought to work together. That’s all. If you don’t like it, then maybe you should leave now, rather than bringing everybody else down.”

Cranston nodded in agreement. “All this negativity is no good. We need to get along.”

I thought for a moment that the bald man was going to take a swing at Russ and Cranston both. Instead, he just stared at them. His expression hovered between pissed off and incredulous. Then he turned his attention back to the chief. If he had more opinions, he didn’t share them with us.

Christy shivered against me.

“You okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m just cold. I hope this doesn’t last much longer. It’s creepy, standing out here in the dark.”

“It’s not completely dark,” I said. “Not like over there.”

I pointed toward the shadowed horizon and immediately regretted it. Acknowledging it seemed to make it more real somehow—seemed to solidify it. At the time, I thought that was just in my head. Thought that I was being superstitious. But now I have to wonder.

Had the darkness heard me, even then? The more I think about it, the more I’m inclined to believe it might have.

Recovering from another bout of coughing, the chief then went over some safety concerns, advising people with generators to make sure they were well vented and talking about fireplaces and the hazards associated with kerosene heaters and candles. I kind of zoned out during that part of the speech.

When he’d finished with his safety checklist, the chief asked, “Are there any questions?”

There were. Lots of them. People had him repeat things he’d already said and wanted him to speculate on what he thought had occurred and wanted to bitch about the situation in general. A few seemed to consider this meeting a chance to share their personal stories, telling the chief and the crowd about their husband or wife who’d left for work or about what they were doing when the darkness came. The chief did a good job of hiding it, but I could see that he was getting annoyed. In truth, I was too.

Then Russ broke the tension. He raised his hand, and the chief wearily motioned to him.

“Yes, sir? You have a question?”

“Yeah,” Russ called. “Where’s these refreshments you said you were gonna have?”

That earned a boisterous round of laughter from both the firemen and the crowd. A few people even applauded.

“Glad you asked,” the chief said. “We’ve got a buffet set up inside the firehouse. It’s not much, I’m afraid. Hot coffee, tea, bottled water, fruit, and some boxes of doughnuts. But with the power out, I imagine most of you could use a good cup of java. Brewed it myself. It’s dark and bitter, but it will definitely keep you awake. Help yourselves. We only ask that you keep things orderly. You are welcome to stay here for a while, if you like, though I imagine it will get pretty crowded. As I said before, the best thing you can do is return to your homes and remain calm. We’re all in this together, and we’ll get through it together.”

The chief turned off the public address system and clambered down from the fire truck. People gathered around him with more questions or just wanting to shake his hand. A few people headed home. Much of the crowd proceeded into the firehouse, but it was slow going and the line jammed up at the doors and spread out into the parking lot. Cranston took a spot in the procession.

“I’ll catch up with you guys later,” he said. “I could use some coffee and I never turn down free doughnuts.”

Russ glanced at Christy and me. “You guys feel like standing in that line?”

“I’ve got a better idea,” I said.

“What?”

“Let’s head to the edge of town. I’d like to see for myself what’s going on.”

Christy paled but said nothing. Russ shook his head.

“I don’t know, Robbie. You heard what the chief said, same as the rest of us. Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“No,” I replied. “I’m not sure. I’m not sure of anything at this point. But with everything that’s going on, I’d much rather see what we’re up

against than stand around drinking coffee and making small talk with a bunch of neighbors I don't know."

Russ frowned. "Why? Chief Peters said that they're gonna send a few firemen out and they'll let us know what's happening."

"Yeah, but I'd rather get a head start on that. If it's as bad as I think it is—and let's be honest, guys, this is some bad fucking shit—then these people are gonna find out soon enough that there might not be any more coffee and doughnuts for a while. I'd rather stock up on things we need before that happens."

Christy appeared shocked. "You think people are going to start looting?"

I shrugged. "They're scared. The chief's speech will keep them calm for a while. Hot coffee and doughnuts make things seem almost normal. But eventually, they're going to walk back outside and see the sky, and those fears are gonna come back. And who knows what will happen then? Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe this will all pass. But I think we need to start thinking about ourselves, just in case."

It took a little more convincing, but both of them agreed to go to the edge of town with me. Our plan was to check things out for ourselves. If it looked as bad as we feared, then we'd come back and figure out what to do next. I hoped that wouldn't mean stealing what we needed to survive, but if it did, then we wanted to do it before everyone else had the same idea.

We walked back home and piled into our beat-up old Pontiac, which was parked alongside the curb. Russ sat in the back. I turned the key and the engine sputtered to life. The headlights beat back the murky shadows. On a whim, I tried the radio. Maybe everybody was wrong. Maybe we'd hear something after all. Maybe we'd come across something—some broadcast from one of the nearby towns or even a barely audible transmission letting us know that things were all right and that everything would be fine. I pressed the scan button and it ran through the FM frequencies twice, but there was nothing. No static, no ghost broadcasts, no weird noises of feedback. No sound of any kind. Then I tried the AM band but just got more of the same. I switched it over to the satellite radio, which we'd had installed in the car with our last income tax return check, but the satellite bands were also silent.

"Dead air," I joked, but nobody laughed.

I flipped on the CD player and Vertigo Sun filled the car.  
It was the only sun we had.  
We drove into the darkness.

## CHAPTER SIX

The darkness on the edge of town was different from the darkness around it.

That was the first thing we noticed. We'd seen hints of that before, when we were standing in town and looking toward the horizon. It became more noticeable as we approached, and once we were actually there, the difference became unsettlingly apparent.

We drove through town, crossed over Route 60 and reached the outskirts of Walden, stopping in front of the big sign on Route 711. The side of the sign that proudly proclaimed *You Are Now Entering Walden, Population 11,873*, faced into the darkness. The side facing us said, *You Are Now Leaving Walden. Please Come Back Soon*. The words seemed to hang in the air, as if the sign were calling out to those who had already entered the darkness.

Please come back soon...

But we hadn't left. We were still there.

I checked the fuel gauge. We had half a tank. I pulled onto the side of the road and put the car in park. Then I considered our options. No way was I turning the headlights off. We needed them. But while I needed to conserve gas, I was hesitant to leave the lights on without the motor running. If the battery died, we were in for a long walk home, and under these conditions, wasting fuel was preferable to shuffling through the shadows. I decided to leave the engine running. As an afterthought, I turned the music off. I figured we didn't need that distracting us while we investigated.

After I opened the door and got out of the Pontiac, Russ and Christy did the same. We shut the doors quietly and moved slowly. The air felt heavy. Oppressive, like before a summer storm. I'd parked the car so that the headlights were pointed into the darkness beyond the sign, but it didn't do much good. It was like the beams were hitting a wall. Just beyond the road sign, the blackness swallowed them up.

It's hard to describe something that's not describable, but fuck it—I'll give it a shot. Imagine that you're sitting in a dark room at night with no

lights or candles or anything else for a source of light. Imagine that there's darkness all around you. Total and complete darkness. Okay? Now imagine that just beyond that darkness is a *different kind* of darkness, blacker than the rest of the darkness around you. It seems to have substance, even though you know it doesn't. It's like tar or India ink. It ripples when you look at it out of the corner of your eye, or maybe it seems to shimmer. You can see the change with your naked eye—the razor line where mere gloom changes into obsidian.

That's what it was like, standing there in the middle of the road.

"Jesus..." Christy's whisper seemed to dissipate, as if the darkness were swallowing sound like it did the headlights.

Russ clicked on his flashlight, shined it into the impenetrable blackness, and stepped forward. I grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Don't go near it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's wrong. Don't you feel it?"

Russ stared at me for a moment without responding, then shrugged me off and turned back to the curtain's edge. He moved the flashlight around, directing the beam at different angles into the gloom. Finally, he spoke.

"This is some fucking weird shit, guys."

Christy and I nodded in agreement. I was about to respond when Christy silenced us.

"Listen," she said.

We did.

At first I didn't hear anything. But after maybe thirty seconds, I noticed that there were sounds in the darkness. They started out quiet but grew louder as we listened—slithering noises, growls and grunts and muted, warbling shrieks. All sounded as if they were coming from a long distance away. Some of the noises sounded human. Others didn't. But in addition to those sounds, each of us heard something else, too. The darkness spoke to us. It whispered to us with familiar voices long unheard. Later, when we compared notes, we learned that each of us had heard something different.

The darkness spoke to Christy with her father's voice. He'd died of a sudden heart attack two years earlier. Secretly I'd always thought that his death had a lot to do with Christy's dependence on drugs and alcohol. I

mean, we both liked to party, but for her, the partying had become something more after her father passed away.

Russ heard his ex-wife's voice in the darkness, which was funny, he said, since before that moment, he hadn't heard from her in more than twelve years. He didn't know anything about her, other than she'd moved to North Carolina and started a new life without him, but now it was like she was hiding in the shadows and calling his name.

For me, the darkness sounded like my grandfather. I never knew my dad, and my mom worked two jobs to provide for me, so my grandparents pretty much raised me. I didn't mind. They were both good people, and I'd loved them very much. Me and Mom lived with them. I slept in Mom's old room, and she slept on the couch. When I was little, my grandfather was my best friend. We built extensive, highly detailed model train dioramas on top of his workbench, outfitting them with little houses and trees and fake grass and tiny cars. When I was twelve, he took me on a trip to Norfolk to see the navy ships heading out to sea, and another time, he took me on a weekend visit to Colonial Williamsburg. In the summertime, he used to take me out on the back roads in his car. When we got to a place where there was no traffic, I'd sit on his lap and he'd let me drive the car. He'd work the gas and brake while I steered. I'd loved him, and still did. Thought of him all the time. He'd passed away when I was fifteen. Came in one day from mowing the lawn, drank half a glass of water, and collapsed in the kitchen. Heart attack, just like Christy's father. I remember how unreal it had all seemed, sitting there by his side along with my grandmother while we waited for the paramedics to arrive. We'd tried CPR and mouth to mouth, but neither worked. His lips were already turning blue by the time the ambulance pulled into the driveway. They said his death was quick, and that nothing could have been done, as if that was supposed to comfort me somehow.

As I'd gotten older, I sometimes forgot how his voice had sounded, but when I heard it there in the darkness, there was no question in my mind—it was him.

Except that it wasn't. I knew that somehow, on some primal, instinctive level I didn't understand; I knew the whispers in the darkness weren't those of my dead grandfather. The voice sounded exactly like him, so much that it made my chest ache. It even smelled like him—Old Spice

and cherry-flavored pipe tobacco and the strong scent of mentholated arthritis cream. Those scents wafted out of the darkness, and they were strangely comforting. But then I realized that there was no breeze to blow them; the air was deathly still, almost stiflingly so. So how was I smelling them? Where was he?

And then, even as those thoughts crossed my mind, he appeared, standing on the far side of the town limits sign, right in the middle of the road. He didn't look like he had when he died—he looked younger than that, the grandfather of my fondest memories. He shone with a pale inner light, like there was a halo bleeding out of him. The light rolled off him like heat waves on a desert road, but it wasn't a warm radiance. That light was cool. Not that I felt it or anything. That's just how it looked. Cold.

False.

*"Hello, Robbie,"* he said. *"Come and give your grandpa a big hug."*

I tried to speak, but my mouth was dry. My tongue and lips felt like they were swelling. The smells grew stronger.

*"Come on,"* he insisted. *"It's been so long. I've missed you."*

He held out his arms to me the way he used to, and I remembered how safe I'd felt with them wrapped around me, squeezing. I didn't feel that way now, and I imagined that if I went to him, the squeeze would be something less than tender or caring. I stayed where I was. In truth, I don't know if I could have moved even if I'd wanted to. My feet felt like they were ankle deep in cement. I glanced over at Russ and Christy. They both stared into the darkness, gaping in the same direction as I'd been, but judging from their reactions, neither was seeing what I saw. I wondered what they were seeing instead. Then I turned back to my grandfather and he smiled.

*"Go away,"* I whispered.

*"Come on, Robbie,"* he urged again. *"At least come over here where I can see you better. You're all grown up now. All that blond hair and those blue eyes. You look like your mother when she was your age."*

He beckoned. The darkness seemed to flow around him like ripples in a black, oily pool.

*"Go away,"* I repeated, closing my eyes. *"Please go away. You're not my grandfather. You're not real. You can't be. You died."*

*"I'm real,"* he said. *"Touch me, Robbie. Feel me. I'm solid."*

I opened my eyes. His eyes seemed to blaze with that cold light. It flared and sparked around his frame, billowing from his head and shoulders and fingertips. He still hadn't moved.

But Russ had. While my eyes were shut, he'd shuffled toward the darkness. He stretched his arms, reaching for something I couldn't see. He had a shocked, confused smile on his face.

"But why didn't you call?" Russ peered into the shadows. "If you had just let me know you were coming, I could have picked you up at the airport."

I glanced in the direction he was staring. There was nothing there that I could see. I turned to Christy, but she seemed oblivious to us both. Weeping, she knelt in the middle of the road, wiped her eyes and nose with her hands, and repeated, "I'm sorry," over and over again.

"Don't be silly," Russ said, smiling. "It's no trouble at all."

"Robbie," my grandfather called. *"Don't worry about them right now. I need you to come closer. It's hard to see you."*

Ignoring him, I ran after Russ. He was just a few feet away from that thin razor line where the darkness became the absence of light. His smile had grown broader, and he nodded in response to something I couldn't hear.

"Sounds good to me," he said. "I missed you, too. You don't know how much. Let's go back to my place. The past is the past."

"Russ!"

He paused but didn't turn to face me. I hurried to catch up with him and grabbed his wrist. He turned to me as if half asleep. The confused smile was still on his face.

I squeezed his wrist. "Where are you going, man?"

"Robbie?" He blinked. "Hey, I want to introduce you to somebody."

"There's no one there, Russ. It's a trick."

"Are you nuts? She's standing right there. Look!"

I did, and she wasn't. I told him so. Then I told him about my grandpa.

"Robbie," my grandfather interrupted, as if on cue. *"Hurry up now. Enough of this foolishness."*

"Shut the fuck up," I shouted.

"Who are you hollering at?" Russ seemed puzzled.

"My grandpa. You didn't hear him, right? And I bet that you can't see him either, can you?"

Russ nodded, frowning. He glanced into the darkness and then back at me.

“And I can’t see or hear whatever it is you see out there,” I explained. “They’re not real, Russ. We’re hallucinating. It’s like a bad acid trip.”

“It’s not...not real?”

“No. It’s just the darkness. Something in the darkness is fucking with our heads, man.”

“She’s not there.”

It wasn’t a question, but I shook my head anyway. Russ rubbed his eyes and hung his head. His shoulders sagged as if he’d been bearing a heavy load. I heard him sniffle and figured he was getting ready to cry. I was about to give him some space and check on Christy—who was still kneeling in the middle of the road—when Russ stopped me.

“Look at this.”

He shone his flashlight beam at his feet. I glanced down and frowned. A series of weird symbols had been spray-painted on the road, on both sides of the yellow dividing line. I bent down and examined them. The characters and shapes formed a picture of some kind, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. It was roughly shaped like a square. A door, maybe? Open or closed; I couldn’t tell which. The red paint was still fresh—not wet, but bright and shiny. A white, crystal-line substance had been poured along their edges, outlining them. I wet my finger, touched the stuff and then tasted some. It was salt. I got the feeling this wasn’t just graffiti. The design seemed more deliberate than that. It wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen before. There was a snake winding around a cross, several stars, some crescents, and something that looked like it belonged to the local Freemason’s lodge. There were a bunch of other symbols that didn’t look like anything at all—at least nothing I’d ever seen. Something had been written across the top. I assumed it was Latin but had no way of knowing for sure. The symbols looked like runes of some kind—maybe something you’d find on an eighties heavy-metal album cover—a classic from Iron Maiden or Blue Oyster Cult or Slayer. Or a diagram from one of those paperback spell books from the metaphysical section of the bookstore. I’d always found those a little suspect. If there was a book that really let you summon demons and shit, would it be wise to mass produce it and sell it at Barnes & Noble for seven bucks?

Here's what the picture in the road looked like. Now, keep in mind, I'm no artist. If it looks like a little kid drew it, that's because I can't fucking draw. Before this, the only thing I've ever drawn was stick figures in school and the occasional crude genitalia on various bathroom walls. This is neither. I've tried to draw it from memory, so some of the details might be a little off. But for the most part, I remember it looking like this:



“What is it?” Russ asked me.

“I don’t know. Some weird ass shit, whatever it is.”

As we studied the graffiti, my grandfather appeared again.

“*Get rid of it,*” he urged. His voice was louder. Almost frantic. “*Take a sledgehammer or a jackhammer or something to it. Dig up the ground around it. If you love me, you’ll do it. Get rid of those silly doodles, and then we can be together again.*”

“No. I told you to fuck off.”

“Who are you talking to?” Russ asked me.

“My dead grandfather.”

“What?”

“I told you. That’s who I saw in the darkness.”

“Is he still there?”

I nodded.

Russ sighed. "My ex is still there, too."

"Sssshhhh," the darkness hissed. "*Robbie, you've got to get rid of it.*"

Ignoring the voice, I stood and walked over to Christy. She was still crying, but she hadn't moved from her spot in the road. She looked up when I approached. Black mascara ran down her cheeks. I offered her my hand and helped her to her feet. She brushed dirt and debris from her jeans. Then I pulled her close.

"You know it's not real, right? Whatever—whoever you saw out there in the darkness? They're not real. It's just a trick."

She sniffled against my chest. "I know. That's why I'm crying. It was my dad, Robbie. He talked to me and everything, but I know it can't be him."

"I saw my grandfather."

"Are we going crazy?"

"No," I whispered, "but maybe the rest of the world is."

The shadows laughed with my grandfather's voice. The echoes boomed out over us. Then the sound faded. Those familiar smells—aftershave and pipe tobacco and arthritis cream—vanished with them. I suddenly felt nauseous. I grabbed my stomach with one hand and gritted my teeth.

There was a burst of light on the horizon, coming from the direction of town. As we watched, a pickup truck approached. Its headlights cut a swath through the murk. It must have belonged to one of the firemen, because it had emergency lights mounted on the roof of the cab. They flashed yellow and red as it approached. Somebody tooted the horn. The truck had a roll cage on the back and oversize tires. Its sides were coated with dried mud. Somebody had been off-roading with it recently. We stepped out of the way. The truck slowed as it neared us and sidled alongside. The engine ran loud and choppy. There were two men inside the cab. The driver rolled down the window and peered out at us.

"You folks okay?"

"We're fine." I nodded. "All things considered."

He pointed ahead of us. "You haven't been out into that have you?"

"No," Russ said. "We just came out to see what we could see. Turns out that's not much."

The driver grunted, grinning humorlessly. "Yeah, no shit."

“Are you the guys the chief is sending to the next town?” I asked.

“That’s us.” He nodded. “Nobody else would volunteer.”

“You might want to be careful,” I told him. “There’s something weird going on out there.”

“Yeah, we can see that. It’s dark in the middle of the day.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I mean, even more than we’ve seen already. Not just the darkness. There’s something else out there. Something *inside* the darkness. More than one, maybe. Or it could be the darkness itself.”

“No offense, but you’re not making much sense.”

“If you listen close, you can hear things in the darkness.”

“You can see them, too.” Russ’s voice sounded sad and frightened.

“You’ll wish you weren’t able to, but you will. Clear as day.”

The driver shifted uncomfortably. Over his shoulder, I saw the passenger doing the same, staring at us as if we were crazy. I couldn’t say that I blamed him. I’d experienced it for myself, but I thought that we sounded crazy, too.

“Things?” the driver asked. “What kind of things?”

“I...well...”

I closed my mouth, unsure how to respond. To be honest, I was sort of embarrassed—and scared.

“What kind of things?” he asked again. “You talking about animals or something? Coyotes? Black bears?”

“The dead,” Christy said. “The dead are out there waiting for us.”

The driver stared at her and blinked twice. Then a sneer slowly spread across his face. He did his best to hide the expression, but I could tell that we’d just confirmed his suspicions.

“The dead?”

Christy nodded. “That’s right. It sounds crazy, but we saw them.”

The passenger made a mocking, eerie howl—the kind a ghost makes on television or in the movies. The driver silenced him with an elbow to the ribs.

“Look folks,” he said, “it’s easy to get scared in a situation like this. Lord knows that we’re scared, too. But you can’t give in to wild speculation and panic. The best thing you guys can do right now is to head back home like the chief requested and just sit tight. Everything is going to be okay. You’ll see. We’ll send back word soon as we make contact with the next

town. Hopefully, they'll have a better handle on whatever is happening. Okay?"

I started to plead with them, to beg them not to drive across that invisible line, but the words stuck in my throat. I couldn't handle them thinking I was crazy again. In truth, I was starting to wonder if maybe I was. In a way, going crazy seemed much more preferable than the alternative—that all of this was real.

Russ shined his flashlight into the driver's face. Squinting, the driver threw up a hand to shield his eyes.

"And what if it's not there," Russ asked. He kept his tone calm and steady. "What if you can't find the next town? What if we're all that's left? What will you do then?"

"Buddy, you mind getting that light out of my face?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I *do* mind. Because you guys need to wake up, man. You need to learn more before you go driving off into that."

"Fuck you."

"Suit yourself." Shrugging, Russ lowered the flashlight. "It's your funeral. But don't say we didn't try to warn you."

"*Robbie*," my grandfather called from the darkness. "*Let them pass. Let them come.*"

"Listen," I said. "Do you hear anything? Anything at all?"

The driver paused, humoring me before responding. "No, I'm sorry, but the only thing I hear is you guys delaying us with this bullshit story you've cooked up for whatever reason. Now move aside. We wait any longer and the chief will have our ass."

"But—"

"You heard me. Move along."

I held up my hand. "But you're not—"

"Good-bye."

Shaking his head, the driver turned toward the road again. The passenger whispered something to him, but I couldn't hear what it was. The driver rolled up the window, and the truck moved slowly forward. The tires concealed the strange, red symbols that had been painted on the pavement and crunched over the line of salt.

"Wait, goddamn it!" I waved at them in frustration, but the driver ignored my shouts.

“Idiots,” Russ muttered.

We watched them go. The brake lights never flashed once, but neither did they pick up speed. The truck crept forward, and the darkness swallowed it inch by excruciating inch. First the headlights were snuffed out. Then the emergency lights on top of the cab. Then the taillights.

And then it was gone.

Fade to black.

We stood there, waiting. I’m not sure for what. Shouts maybe. Another toot of the horn. The sound of the engine. But there was nothing—just silence.

Then the screams began. They sounded like they were coming from a far distance, but I was sure they were much closer than that.

Christy began crying again, shuddering against me. Russ let out a sort of garbled squawk. I said nothing. I couldn’t have if I’d wanted to. There was a lump in my throat and it was hard enough to breathe, let alone speak. My nausea grew stronger. I clutched my stomach as a cramp ran through me.

“They’re gone.” Christy’s upper lip glistened with snot, reflected in the flashlight beam. “Should we go after them?”

“No,” I told her. “No way. Not unless we want to end up like that.”

“We can’t just leave them out there, Robbie!”

“Listen.” I grabbed her shoulders. “Do you hear anything? The screaming has already stopped. It’s quiet again. Whatever happened to them, it’s already over.”

“He’s right,” Russ said. “We tried to warn them. Our conscience is clear.”

I nodded. “Even if we did venture out there, it wouldn’t matter. There’s nothing we can do for them now.”

“There is one thing we can do,” Russ said. “Not for them, but for those who are left. We need to warn people. Tell them what happened, in case anyone else wants to leave.”

Something growled in the shadows. We all spun around, peering into the blackness, but there was nothing there. The darkness shimmered. Once again it reminded me of a heat mirage on a hot summer road. We watched it apprehensively, but nothing solid appeared.

“Did you guys hear that?” I asked.

“The chainsaw?” Russ nodded. “Kind of hard to miss, right?”  
I shook my head. “It wasn’t a chainsaw. Something just growled at us.”

“I heard something different,” Christy said. “It wasn’t either of those.”

Russ turned back to the darkness. “What the hell is going on?”

“We’re each hearing something different again.”

“What do you want?” Russ shouted at the shadows. “Who are you?  
Why are you doing this?”

The darkness responded. This time, we all heard the same thing.

It was laughing at us.

“Let’s get out of here,” Christy pleaded. All the resolve was gone from her voice. “Please, Robbie?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Let’s bail.”

We walked back to the car. We didn’t run, although I think all three of us probably wanted to. Personally, the only reason I resisted the urge to run was because of the pain in my gut. We didn’t tarry either, though. Christy held my hand tightly, refusing to let go. She squeezed so hard that my knuckles got ground together, but I didn’t stop her. Russ shuffled along beside us, breathing hard.

“You okay?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, I’m not. None of us are.”

I turned around and glanced at the darkness. I don’t know what I was expecting to see or hear, but the result was nothing, in either case. The darkness was silent again.

But I was sure that it was watching us leave.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I don't remember a lot about the drive back to town. We didn't talk much. Each of us was lost in our own thoughts, shaken by the visions the darkness had shown us and what had happened after the firemen went into it. I mean, let's be honest—the whole thing was pretty fucked up. It was hard to know how to react. I felt numb and emotionless. Not tired or scared or freaked out—just...*numb*.

We discussed stocking up on supplies from the stores but ultimately decided against it. We knew that we needed to, but all of us were just too tired. Hell, we weren't just tired. We were physically and mentally exhausted. Scared as we were, all we wanted to do was go home and hide. Supplies would have to wait.

Occasionally, Christy quietly sobbed, but when I tried to comfort her, she'd pull away.

We passed quite a few cars and even more pedestrians. Apparently we hadn't been the only people to ignore the chief's request to return to our homes. Other curiosity seekers were turning out to investigate the darkness for themselves. Some drove the speed limit. Others zoomed by, heedless of any traffic laws or posted speed limits, passing the cars in front of them. Of the people walking alongside the road, some looked frantic and others seemed merely passive. As we went through one intersection, we saw a motorcycle lying on its side in the middle of the road—one of those big touring bikes. I couldn't tell what make or model. It was dinged up pretty bad, but there was no sign of the driver. I carefully swerved around it, almost hitting a dog that was running around off its leash. If the dog had a master, he wasn't there. Russ rolled down the window and called to it, but the dog ran away.

After the intersection, we came across another car—a blue Honda Civic. It was broken down in front of the storage unit rental place. The hood was up and a woman stood bent over the engine. Steam rose from the motor, swirling in the headlight beams. I pulled alongside her and stopped. I checked the rearview mirror, but there was nobody behind us. I hadn't

really figured there would be. People were heading toward the darkness, but no one was coming from it.

I rolled down the window. "Need some help?"

The woman straightened up and turned to me. Her eyes were wide and distraught. It was hard to tell in the gloom, but it looked like she might have been crying.

"I don't know what's wrong with it. I think maybe it's overheating or something."

"Have you checked your coolant lately?" Russ called out from the backseat.

She shrugged. "I don't know. My husband usually takes care of all that. I don't know anything about cars."

"Well," I said, trying to muster some sympathy even though I still felt numb inside, "it looks like you're stuck for a while. Want us to give you a ride back into town? Maybe your husband can look at it later?"

"He's at work. Bob works for the Library of Congress. He commutes to Washington, D.C., every day, so he leaves really early. And I've got to get our baby to the doctor. He has an appointment today. He's asleep in the back. If he wakes up and starts crying..."

Her voice trailed off. She raised her arm and made a sweeping motion toward the Civic. Sure enough, there was the shadowy outline of a car seat sticking up in the back, presumably with a baby inside it.

I smiled. "We can probably fit that car seat in the back, if you want me to try?"

"No," she said. "We can't go back home. I told you, he has a doctor's appointment. He's only three weeks old, and he's been having trouble breastfeeding. We put him on formula, but he was allergic to that. Now they have him on some hypo-allergenic stuff, but he's still losing weight and..." Her voice cracked.

"Ma'am," I said softly, "where is the doctor's office located?"

"In Verona."

"It might not be a good idea to go there right now. I don't know if you heard what the chief said earlier, but there's a situation."

"I know that," she snapped. "I'm not blind. It's dark outside. Big deal. Weren't you listening? He's got to see the pediatrician. If he's still losing weight, then..." She trailed off again, glancing back down at the smoking

engine. “They said if he hadn’t gained weight by today they were going to check him into the hospital and start feeding him intravenously.”

I paused, considering our limited options. That numb feeling started to evaporate, replaced with an intense sense of pity. I didn’t know this woman or her baby, but they needed our help. All you had to do was look at her to know that she was at the end of her rope and close to cracking.

I opened my mouth to respond, but Christy reached out and squeezed my leg. Her nails dug into my skin through my sweatpants. I turned to her.

“Do *not* offer her a ride to Verona,” she whispered. “No way, Robbie. You said it yourself. We can’t go out there.”

“We’re not.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah. I’m not going to offer her a ride.”

Shrugging Christy’s hand away, I turned off the car and got out. The woman jumped back a little. I held up my hands and tried to smile reassuringly again.

“It’s okay. I just want to look under the hood.”

Christy stayed inside the car, pouting. Russ got out and joined me in front of the Civic. The woman eyed us warily, but her expression was hopeful. I peeked under the open hood. Russ shined his light on the engine while I examined it. The air smelled sickly sweet, and the steam was nauseating. It made my stomach lurch again, and for a moment I thought I was going to puke right there. Instead, I focused on the task at hand.

“There.” Russ pointed with the flashlight. “You see it?”

The radiator hose had a huge split down the middle, and coolant had sprayed from the rupture and all over the engine. Using my shirt, I unscrewed the radiator cap. It was hot, even through the fabric. I winced, then set it to the side. Russ shined his flashlight down into the dark hole. The radiator was bone dry.

Russ turned to the woman. “Got any duct tape in the car?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“How about you, Robbie? Got anything in the trunk that we can fix that hose with, at least temporarily?”

“The only things in our trunk are an old beach blanket and some seashells left over from our trip to Virginia Beach. And the tire jack.”

“Can you fix it?” The woman’s voice took on a hopeful, pleading tone. I was hesitant to answer, not wanting to crush what was left of her spirit. Instead of replying, I just shook my head and screwed the radiator cap back on.

“Not really,” I said, “but I’m sure we could help you get it towed back home.”

Her voice grew shrill. “I don’t want it towed. I want it *fixed!*”

“You’ve lost all your coolant,” Russ explained. “And the hose is busted. Even if you could go to Verona, we wouldn’t be able to fix it enough to get you that far. The coolant would just leak out again.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do? I’ve got to get my baby to the doctor!”

A group of people shuffled past us, giving the car a wide berth. Many of them glanced at us, but nobody stopped to help or even comment. They were heading toward the darkness. I considered telling them not to bother, but I already had my hands full with this woman. They’d find out for themselves when they got there. I wondered whose voice the darkness would speak to them with.

I closed the hood. “Are you sure we can’t talk you out of going?”

She shook her head.

“It’s dangerous out there,” I told her. “You might very well be killed. Your baby, too.”

She stared at us, as if searching for some indication that we were playing a joke. When she saw the seriousness in our expressions, she looked away.

“If my baby stays here,” she said softly, “then he’ll die, too. He’s sick. Please. I don’t expect you to understand. But I *have* to get him to Verona, no matter what the risk. I’m not going to let my baby just starve to death.”

I didn’t know what to do. I felt helpless—wanting desperately to assist her but not knowing how to go about it. She was determined to go out into the darkness, and short of dragging her away or kidnapping her child, I couldn’t see any way of stopping her. In the backseat, the baby began to cry—a high-pitched squeal that sounded more like a pterodactyl in a movie than an infant. My sense of helplessness turned into hopelessness, then a sort of desperate resignation.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” she called softly. “Mommy’s here. It will all be okay.”

I wondered if she was trying to assure the baby or herself. Then something strange happened. I studied the woman. I’d never seen her around before, but I knew her type. She lived on the other end of town, in one of the new cookie-cutter McMansions that had gone up in the past few years where there used to be farmland and trees. I didn’t know her because her kind didn’t come to our section of town, except maybe to check out cheap investment opportunities and become amateur slumlords. A dull sort of malaise overwhelmed me. I didn’t know where the emotion was coming from, but I felt it just the same.

I glanced at Russ and then at our car, where Christy was leaning out the window, listening to the exchange. I wondered if they were feeling what I was feeling. Judging by her expression, Christy must have known what I was going to do even before I knew it myself. We’d been together awhile, and I guess we could read each other’s minds like any other long-term couple. Anticipate each other’s moves. In any case, she didn’t seem as surprised as I did when I walked over to our car, pulled my keys out of the ignition, and handed them to the stranded woman. Christy didn’t protest. Russ, however, seemed shocked. He gasped out loud.

“Here,” I said to the woman. “Take our car. I really wish you’d reconsider this, but I understand why you won’t. We can’t go with you, so please don’t ask us to. We just won’t. We’ve seen what’s out there and I don’t know how to make you understand. But if we can’t change your mind, then take our car and do it.”

She stared at me, blinking. I jingled the keys in front of her, and after a pause, she took them hesitantly, as if I were handing her a poisonous snake or a flaming bag of dog shit instead.

“I can’t...”

“Then don’t,” I said. “Because I’m telling you, you don’t want to go past the town limits. There’s some weird graffiti painted on the road, near the sign that says you’re leaving town. From what I’ve seen, you’ll be okay until you pass that. But beyond it...”

“Yes?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m just guessing, really. But it ain’t good. And if you care about your child, you won’t risk it.”

“But...” Her eyes flicked to the horizon and then back to mine.  
“What’s out there?”

“The dark. It’s the dark.”

The baby’s cries grew louder. She closed her eyes, hung her head, and reached for the keys.

“I have to,” she explained. “I hear what you’re saying, but I’m so worried about him, and I just...I don’t know what else to...he’s sick...”

I turned to Christy and motioned at her to get out of the car. She scowled at me as she climbed from the passenger seat.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this, Robbie.”

“Neither can I.”

I tried to hold her hand, but she pulled away from me.

The woman opened her car door and leaned into the back. “Can one of you help me switch the car seat into your car?”

Russ and I glanced at each other and then shook our heads.

“I can’t,” he apologized. “Sorry, but I won’t be a party to it. Especially not your baby.”

She turned to me and I held up my palm.

“I can’t either. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll need your address,” she said. “To return the car when we get back.”

“It’s on the insurance card, inside the glove compartment.” My voice was monotone.

She thanked us profusely and then opened the Civic’s back door, talking to her baby and assuring him that everything would be okay. His cries gradually ceased. The pain in my stomach turned to stone when he cooed softly.

The three of us started walking back to town. Behind us, I heard our car start up and drive away. Gravel crunched under the tires. Too late, I realized that I’d forgotten to get my CDs out of the glove compartment. Then I remembered that with no electricity, there was no way for me to listen to them back at the apartment anyway. I hung my head. My shoulders slumped. Christy and Russ cursed me out and told me what an idiot I was, and I didn’t argue with them. Russ insisted on knowing why I’d done it.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “I honestly don’t. A feeling just sort of came over me. That’s the only way I can explain it. I didn’t really think

about it. I just did it.”

“You don’t even know who she was,” he said.

“No,” I agreed, “I didn’t. But she wanted help, and that was the only thing I could do for her. It was the right thing to do.”

“The right thing to do?” Christy spat on the road. “You gave her our fucking car.”

“I know. We’re in a crisis situation here, hon. We all need to pitch in and help each other.”

“Oh, bull-fucking-shit, Robbie!” Russ threw his hands up in the air. “You sent that woman and her baby to their fucking death. How is that helping them?”

“We don’t know for sure that they’ll die.”

“Of course we do. You heard what happened to those firemen—and what happened before that. There’s something out there, and it’s not friendly. You knew, but you still let her go.”

I wheeled on him and jabbed my finger into his chest. Fuming, Russ balled his hands into fists. Christy’s eyes went wide.

“Well, I didn’t see you stepping in to stop her,” I shouted. “If you were so fucking concerned, then why didn’t you take the keys from her, or force her and her kid into our car and drive them back to town?”

“Fuck you.”

“No, fuck you. You’re just as much a part of this as I am, Russ. Whatever it was that came over me, it came over you, too. So drop the fucking holier-than-thou shit.”

“I’ve got a better idea, Robbie. How about I just drop you instead?”

“You’re welcome to try.”

“Both of you stop it,” Christy yelled. “What the hell are you doing? Are you really gonna stand out here and beat the shit out of each other? How is that going to help us?”

For a second, I thought Russ was going to hit me. His entire body tensed. His chest felt like a stone slab beneath my fingertip. Then he relaxed and took a step backward.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “What’s happening to us, guys? What the hell is going on here? I’m sorry, Robbie.”

“I’m sorry, too, man.”

“It’s like this darkness is infecting us,” Christy said. “Getting inside our heads and hearts and making us dark, too.”

Russ shook his head but said nothing.

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe this is just human nature. Maybe this is how we start acting when our backs are to the wall. I would think that’s more likely—if not exactly reassuring.”

“No,” Russ replied. “We’re better than that. I don’t give a shit how scared we are. We can’t start turning on each other.”

“No,” I agreed. “We can’t. But we almost did. So what does that tell us?”

Neither Christy nor Russ answered. We continued down the highway, heading back into town. I apologized to Russ again and he did the same to me. Then I told Christy that I was sorry about the car. She called me an asshole again, which was her way of saying the apology was accepted.

We never saw our car—or the woman and her baby—again.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

People started dying that night.

Night is, of course, a relative fucking term, but we were still thinking in terms of day and night at that point.

When we got back to the apartment building, Russ and I apologized to each other one more time. Then we both apologized to Christy for upsetting her. I felt terrible about reacting that way to them both. I was emotionally exhausted, still scared, and feeling guilty about the woman and her baby.

Russ excused himself and went upstairs to get something to eat, and Christy and I returned to our apartment for some alone time. In this case, “alone time” meant arguing about the car some more, which, after our anger faded, eventually led to a cautious, hushed discussion about the strange surge of emotions that had led to me giving it away. Christy admitted to experiencing the same weird malaise that I had felt. She also confessed that she’d been thinking that if the woman was so intent on killing herself and her baby, then Russ and I should have quit trying to talk her out of it and let her get down to business instead. Just not with our car.

“It was the darkness,” she whispered, glancing at the window as if the blackness could hear us. And who knows? Maybe it could. “I wasn’t upset that she took her baby out there. I was upset about the stupid car. That’s not me, Robbie. You know that.”

“No,” I agreed. “It isn’t. Neither of us acted like ourselves.”

“It was the darkness. Somehow, it affected our reactions. Our emotions. Made us behave in ways we normally wouldn’t.”

“It can’t do that.”

Christy pulled her legs up under her on the sofa. “How do you know?”

“Because...well, I don’t.”

“Darkness doesn’t talk to us with the voices of the dead either. But it did. So why couldn’t it make us do things?”

“I don’t know, hon.”

Candles flickered against the walls, and the apartment filled with the competing scents of lavender, vanilla sugar, lilac, and cinnamon. Outside

someone was shouting, but neither one of us got up to check and see what was going on. There'd been shouts and screams throughout the day, and this one was no different.

"It was the darkness," she repeated. "First it showed us our loved ones. Then it got inside our heads."

"But how? And why?"

"Because we're dead, Robbie. All of us. This whole goddamn town. Maybe the entire world. We're dead, and this is the afterlife. All that's left is darkness."

"Bullshit."

"It's true," she insisted. "Just darkness and ghosts."

"We're not dead, Christy. We'd remember it if we died."

"Maybe not," she said. "If you were in a sudden car crash, or somebody shot you from behind, would you remember that?"

"No, but somebody couldn't have sneaked up behind the entire town and shot each of us in the head."

"Yeah, but there are plenty of other ways we could have all died suddenly. And that would explain what's happened to us. Sherri at work says ghosts don't realize that they're dead. That's why they hang around, just haunting places—because they're trapped in the darkness between worlds. There's no light for them to follow. They can't leave because of the darkness. Sound familiar?"

I took a long swig of warm beer. "But I still don't see how. I mean, we couldn't have all died at once."

"Why not? Maybe a bomb really did go off and killed us all while we were sleeping. Or maybe an asteroid hit the Earth or something."

"Or maybe you just need some sleep."

She leaned over and punched my arm. "Don't be a smart-ass, Robbie. I was just trying to talk to you."

"Well, let's talk about something different for a while."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry, Christy, but you're talking crazy."

"Me? What about earlier? You heard it for yourself. You saw your grandfather, Robbie."

"Yeah, but that was out there on the edge of town. There it seemed...I don't know. More real. I can believe there's something in the darkness

because I've seen it and heard it for myself. But this stuff about ghosts and the afterlife—it's just crazy."

She blanched. "Excuse me for being scared and trying to make sense of our situation."

She banged her beer down on the coffee table and stood quickly, grabbing a flashlight and stomping toward the bedroom. I called after her, but she slammed the door. A moment later, I heard the mattress springs groan as she flung herself into bed. I got up and went to the door.

"I'm sorry," I yelled. "Look, we're both tired and scared. It's been a long, weird day. Our nerves are just a little frazzled. But I'm sorry."

There was silence. Then I heard feet padding across the carpet. The bedroom door opened, and Christy peered out at me. She'd been crying.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, more quietly this time. "I didn't mean it. Okay?"

"It wasn't you. It's the darkness. It's making you mean. Making me mean, too."

"You weren't mean. Like you said, you were just trying to talk to me. I should have been more supportive and—"

"But I *was* mean," Christy said. "You just didn't know it."

"What are you talking about?"

"When you got sarcastic with me, I had a sudden urge to smash my beer bottle on the table and cut your throat with it. I saw it really clear in my mind. I could even hear the glass slicing through your skin and feel your blood on my hand. Your blood was hot, and it sort of turned me on."

"Jesus, Christy..."

"I know! Why would I think about doing something so horrible? What's wrong with me? I wanted to kill you!"

She rushed to me, sobbing, and buried her head in my chest. I held her, stunned and speechless by the revelation.

"We're not ourselves," she whimpered. "What's happening to us, Robbie?"

"We're stressed, we're tired, and we're freaked the fuck out. That's all. It's really late and we need some sleep."

"But it's not late. It's barely three in the afternoon."

"That can't be right. No way. It's later than that. Feels like eleven or midnight."

“I checked that old watch in my jewelry drawer—the one my grandmother gave me. I wound it not too long ago because I still wear it sometimes. It was a quarter till three.”

Doubting that was accurate, I got up and checked my own wristwatch. I’d taken it off when we got home and laid it on the entertainment center. I was surprised to see that it had stopped working. Apparently, the battery was dead.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“My watch is busted.”

“I’m telling you, Robbie. It’s close to three.”

“It feels later than that.”

“Yes,” Christy agreed, “it does. Because of what’s outside. Because of the darkness. And because of what we’re becoming.”

“We’re not ghosts, honey. Please don’t start that shit again.”

“Aren’t we?”

“No.”

“Are we alive, Robbie? Are we still human? Because we sure as hell don’t seem to be acting like it anymore. And if we’re not human, then what are we?”

I didn’t answer.

“Maybe you’re right,” she continued. “Maybe it *is* later than we think. Late for us all.”

Her voice took on a cracked, hysterical tone. I gently led her into the pitch-black bedroom and lay her down on the bed. Then I turned on the flashlight.

“You need to sleep. We’ll talk about it more when you wake up. Okay?”

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“Please? For me?”

“Let me burn one first. I need it.”

“Honey—”

“It will help me relax. Just a few bong hits.”

“Better not,” I said. “God knows when we’ll be able to get another bag of weed, and we’re almost down to stems and seeds.”

“Shit.”

“Exactly. Now, go to sleep. Okay?”

She nodded weakly. Her head sank into the pillow. I brushed her hair from her eyes and kissed her forehead.

“It would be easier if it had just been the darkness by itself,” she said. “If there hadn’t been anything out there in it.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I kept it to myself. Thinking about it, I actually preferred the ghosts—not that I believed they were ghosts—and the sounds to nothing at all. The darkness was creepy enough, but to have it be silent, too? That seemed scarier somehow. It would have made it even more mysterious. More unknown. And fear of the unknown is almost as strong as a fear of the dark. Combining the two might have been too much for anyone to handle.

“Go to sleep,” I urged again. “You need to rest.”

“What about you?”

“I’m not sleepy yet,” I said. “I’ll sit up for a while, just in case the chief sends someone around with news.”

She grabbed my wrist. “Don’t leave me here in the dark, Robbie.”

“I won’t. I’ll bring you a candle.”

I did and set it on the nightstand next to her. She relaxed after that, and I sat with her until she fell asleep. It didn’t take long. The worried lines on her face gradually softened and smoothed. Her lips fell slightly open. Soon she was snoring softly. Her warm breath lightly grazed my face. Her eyeballs moved beneath their lids.

“Good night, Christy,” I whispered. “I love you. And I promise that I’ll take care of everything.”

She murmured, but remained asleep. I moved slowly so as not to wake her and returned to the living room. Then I waited. I don’t know for what exactly. I just waited. There wasn’t anything else to do. Nobody to talk to and no television to watch. No radio. I didn’t even have enough light to read, and didn’t have any books even if I’d wanted to. Even though I was still physically exhausted, my mind was now awake and alert. To make matters worse, my internal clock was all fucked up. I couldn’t shake the feeling that it seemed later in the day than it really was.

Later for us all, just like Christy had said.

My mind wandered to the line of salt and the weird graffiti spray-painted in the middle of the road. Again, I tried to figure out what the

picture had represented. It had sort of resembled a door. The ghost—the thing that looked like my grandfather, but wasn’t—had told me to get rid of it. It had said that once the symbols were gone, we could be together again. What had it meant by that? Nothing had happened to the firemen until they passed over the salt and symbols. What was it about them that kept us safe?

Footsteps thudded overhead. The disturbance caused the light suspended from the living room ceiling to swing slowly back and forth. Russ was awake too apparently. I checked on Christy one more time, making sure she was sleeping soundly. I was a little nervous about leaving her alone after everything that had happened to us, but I wanted to talk to Russ and see if he’d gained any new perspective or come to any conclusions. In truth, I’d always been in awe of Russ’s intellect. I mean, he was one of us. But he knew a lot of shit—shit you only learned in college or elsewhere. Not the sort of things you learned living in a small town in Virginia.

I crept out of the apartment and went upstairs. The stairwell was dark, and I hadn’t brought the flashlight; I’d left it behind for Christy in case she woke up. (The batteries in her flashlight were fading already, and the beam had grown dim on our way home.) I walked slowly, navigating blindly. I kept a firm grip on the rail with one hand and let my fingertips brush along the wall with the other, until I came to Russ’s door. He answered on the second knock. He looked even more disheveled than he had earlier in the day. Smelled riper, too. He barely acknowledged me—merely nodded a greeting and stepped aside to let me in. I wondered if, despite his apologies earlier, he was still pissed off about the woman and the baby.

I walked through the door and caught a whiff of tea brewing. I’m a coffee person and not much of a tea drinker, but the scent revitalized my senses. I inhaled through my nose, breathing deep. Then I coughed. Beneath the aroma was a sharp hint of kerosene. It made my eyes water a little.

“Want a cup?” Russ asked. “I got Irish Breakfast or Darjeeling.”

“Darjeeling? What the hell is that?”

“Man, you’ve never heard of Darjeeling?”

“No.”

“It’s the champagne of teas! You’ve really never had it?”

I shook my head. “No. Can’t say that I have. If I did, then I didn’t know it.”

“Well, we’ll fix that soon enough. I’ll make you a cup right now.”

I followed him into the kitchen. “How the hell are you heating it?”

“Got out my old kerosene heater and there was still fuel inside of it. I’m putting the kettle on top of it until the water boils. Heated up some noodles earlier the same way.”

Sure enough, the kerosene heater sat in the middle of the kitchen floor, casting a soft, orange glow on the walls and cabinets. The room was noticeably warmer than the rest of the apartment. Russ grabbed a cracked coffee mug and plopped a tea bag in it, then poured some hot water into the cup. Not bothering to let it steep, I sipped the hot tea and sighed. Immediately, I felt the caffeine kick in, though not as much as I’d have gotten from a cup of coffee.

“Thanks, man. I needed that.”

“Don’t mention it. Here, add some of this to it.”

He pulled a pint of bourbon from a drawer and poured some in my mug.

“Now we’re talking,” I said, grinning.

“Special occasion. And listen, Robbie—I’m sorry about earlier. I don’t know what came over me. I was pissed, but still...”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “We were both out of line.”

We fell silent for a few minutes, each lost in our own thoughts.

I took another sip and sighed. “This is really good, man.”

“Thanks. My ex-wife, Olivia, turned me on to it.”

“You’ve never really talked about her.”

He shrugged. “No, I don’t guess I have. You’d think that after so many years, it wouldn’t bother me to talk about her, but it still does. We got married right after I got out of the Air Force.”

“I didn’t know you were in the Air Force. You never talk about that either.”

“Shit, Robbie. There’s a lot of things I don’t talk about. The past is the past, you know? We can’t change it, so I don’t see any sense dwelling on it. Anyway, we got married after I got out. We were too young, I guess. Never had any kids, thank God. Not that I wouldn’t mind having kids someday. I’m just glad I didn’t have them with her.”

I wondered if, with everything that had happened outside, Russ would ever get the opportunity to have kids, but I didn’t voice my doubts.

“It’s not that we ended up hating each other or anything. Hell, I never cheated on her and as far as I know, she was faithful to me, too. We just sort of grew apart. I know that sounds like a fucking cliché, but it’s true. We were twenty-five when we got married and thirty when we split up. Five years doesn’t seem like a lot of time, but there’s miles of difference between twenty-five and thirty. You’ll see.”

Again, I wondered about that. The way things were looking, there was a chance that neither Christy nor I would ever reach thirty.

“Anyway,” Russ continued, staring at the mug in his hands, “we split up. She moved to North Carolina. Started a new life. One that didn’t involve me. I think about her a lot. Even after all this time. I thought that would change. Figured over time, the wounds would heal. If they did, they left behind a lot of scar tissue. Especially at night. Sometimes I wake up and pat the other side of the bed, wondering where she is. Then I remember.”

I wanted to respond, but didn’t know what to say.

“Anyway,” Russ said, “I haven’t seen or heard from her until today.”

“So...she didn’t die or anything like that?”

“No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Christy thinks that what we saw today were ghosts. She saw her dad. I saw my grandfather. Both of them are dead. But your ex-wife was alive. So they couldn’t have been ghosts.”

“Far as I know, she’s still alive. But who knows for sure? What if what happened to us really did happen everywhere else? What if she died and I didn’t know it? Then it could have been her ghost, I guess.”

Something in his tone told me that he didn’t believe that. I asked him, and he confirmed it.

“I don’t think they’re ghosts.”

“Any idea what they really are then?”

“Personally, I think that whatever is out there—whatever force or intelligence is lurking in the darkness—showed us what we most wanted to see. Our heart’s desires. I bet you loved your grandfather, right?”

I nodded. “More than just about anyone. He was like a father to me.”

“Well, there you go. It wanted us to venture into the darkness, so it tempted us with visions of the people we loved the most.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that as creepy and fucked up as that shit was, it was still good to see Olivia, even if it wasn’t really her. All I have are pictures and memories.”

“And Darjeeling tea,” I added with a grin.

Russ laughed. “Yeah, that too.”

“Aren’t you worried about wasting kerosene, though?”

Russ shrugged. “I’m more worried about running out of bourbon. But in either case, I can get more eventually. I mean, this darkness can’t last forever, right? Sooner or later, it will lift. Just wait and see.”

I wondered if he was trying to convince me or himself.

“I want to apologize for earlier,” I said. “I don’t know what the hell happened, but—”

Russ held up his hand. “Don’t worry about it, Robbie. You were right. If it had really mattered to me, I would have stepped in and stopped you. In truth, I was sort of secretly grateful when you gave her your car.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to get the fuck out of there. It felt like we were still too close to the edge of town—to that barrier where the darkness got darker, you know? And the longer we stood there trying to reason with her, the more it felt like the darkness was listening. I can’t explain it any better than that.”

I blew on my tea to cool it and took another sip. He’d been right. It really was the champagne of teas. I made a mental note to buy some if civilization ever got going again.

“My point is,” he continued, “none of us behaved very characteristically today. When push came to shove, I chose my own welfare over that mother and her baby. I feel guilty about it, but it bothers me even more that I’m not being totally racked by guilt. I mean, by all rights, we should both be curled into the fucking fetal position by now. But we’re not. Maybe it’s just human nature. Maybe this crisis is just bringing out the worst in us.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “I’ve got to tell you, Russ, I’m pretty fucking scared right now.”

“Me too, brother. Me too.” He poured himself another cup of tea, reusing the previous tea bag. “Anyway, enough about that shit. Is Christy okay?”

“Yeah, she’s sleeping. I figured I’d see what you were doing. You want to play cards or something?”

“I was just about to head up to the roof. Want to join me?”

“Hell yeah.”

Russ grabbed a flashlight. We took our drinks out onto the fire escape and climbed onto the roof. Russ already had his telescope positioned. Since it was weatherproofed, he kept it there year-round. And it wasn’t like somebody would come along and steal it. The only way to get onto the fire escape was through our apartment or his. It didn’t reach as far as Cranston’s place on the first floor, unless you disengaged the ladder.

The air was still. I sat my mug down on the ledge and peered out at the town. It was weird, seeing everything so black. Candles still burned in a few windows, but otherwise the buildings were dark. The huge floodlights that had dominated the area around the firehouse were turned off. That entire block was lost in gloom. One house in the distance was strung up with multicolored Christmas lights that blinked on and off in the darkness. I assumed that whoever lived there must have a working generator. Overall, though, the streets had more light—burning trash barrels dotted a few corners and people clustered around them—but even that radiance seemed pale and thin, as if the blackness was smothering it. As I watched, two figures around the barrels began to tussle. I couldn’t make out their features or even their gender. They were just wrestling shadows. But I heard flesh striking flesh and cries of anger or pain.

“Not the first fight today,” Russ grunted. “I’ve been hearing screams and shouts off and on ever since we got back.”

“Maybe it’s time for Chief Peters to hold another community meeting. Try to calm people down—figure out a plan of action. He’s been awfully quiet since that first meeting.”

“Kind of early for another meeting, isn’t it? He just had one. And besides, what good is it gonna do? I mean, he’s the fire chief, not the police. It’s not like he can enforce the law or anything. People don’t have to listen to him, unless they’re violating the fucking fire code.”

“He’s an authority figure. That’s something.”

“That ain’t shit. Not anymore.”

“That’s not what you said this morning. When we were at the meeting, you got into it with that guy for disrespecting the chief.”

“That was then. This is now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“I mean that things have changed. Do I respect the chief? Sure. At least he’s trying to do something about our situation. But from what we’ve seen today, I don’t think there’s anything he can do. Wise up, Robbie. We’re trapped in this town. That darkness has us surrounded, and if things don’t change, or they get worse, pretty soon, it’s going to be every man for himself. When that happens, it won’t matter what the chief’s plan is.”

“This isn’t fucking Thunderdome, man.”

“Give it time. Give it time.”

“I thought you were the one who said this wouldn’t last?”

“And I still don’t think it will. I believe that just like any other crisis, this too shall pass. But that doesn’t matter right now. Things change quickly, and it only takes a minute for the world to flip upside down. There are all kinds of bad things that could happen before we get rescued. Look at New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. All the violence and madness—that shit started before the storm was even over. They were raping and killing people inside that stadium right in front of the news cameras, just because they could. Roaming the streets, looting and firing at cops, and knowing full well that the media was recording it all. But the people just didn’t give a shit. If people think they can get away with something without repercussions, then chances are they’ll try it. Especially if they’ve lost hope or are desperate.”

“But that kind of stuff can’t happen here. Not in Walden. I mean, sure, we’ve got drugs and crime and shit, but mass-scale looting and riots? It would never happen here.”

“It can happen anywhere. The only reason we didn’t loot today is that we were too worn out after going to the edge of town. If you and I had the idea to start looting, then you can bet a bunch of other people did, too.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You ever read ‘Nightfall’ by Isaac Asimov?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s a pretty good story. You should read it. I’ll lend it to you.”

“What’s it about?”

“There’s this astronomer on a planet where it’s always daylight—”

“How does that happen?”

“Because they have multiple suns. This astronomer figures out that all the suns are about to set for the first time in thousands of years. Last time that happened, their civilization collapsed because there was mass panic, chaos, and insanity when night fell. Think about that for a minute, and then apply it to our situation.”

As if to punctuate the topic of our conversation, somewhere in the blackness, a woman shrieked and sobbed. The sound erupted suddenly, without warning, and stopped just as abruptly. From our location, it was impossible to tell where the noise had come from—not our building, certainly, but not that far away either. Within a few blocks, at least.

“It can happen anywhere,” Russ repeated. He turned the flashlight off and handed it to me. Then he walked toward his telescope.

“I guess you’re right,” I said. “It’s just sort of depressing. You’d think that after landing a man on the moon and a robot on Mars and inventing the goddamn internet, we’d be a bit more evolved by now.”

“Nah. We’re animals, Robbie. Always have been. Always will be. If dolphins had opposable thumbs, they’d replace us as the dominant species in a heartbeat.”

I was getting depressed again, so I decided to change the subject. I took another swig of tea. It was already going cold, and the whiskey in it tasted stronger now.

“So even though it’s dark outside, it’s not technically nighttime. Shouldn’t you wait to go stargazing?”

“Nope. The only reason we don’t do it during the day is because of the sunlight. We don’t have to worry about that now. And with the power still out, now’s the perfect time. There won’t be any light pollution at all. I should be able to see stars that I’ve never seen before from this rooftop.”

I glanced up at the sky. “I don’t see anything.”

“Don’t worry. There are about three thousand stars visible from earth’s surface without a telescope or binoculars on dark, moonless nights. Tonight is the exception.”

“That’s an understatement.”

He chuckled. “But those stars are still there, even though you can’t see them. They aren’t going anywhere. Now, it could be this darkness is some kind of dense, uniform cloud cover or smog. If so, this telescope is powerful enough to see through that.”

“You really think it’s just smog? Even after today?”

He paused before answering. “Not really, although it would explain why we can’t see the stars with the naked eye. But we will with the telescope. You wouldn’t believe how much this thing cost. It was the only item I kept after Olivia and I got divorced, other than my books and music collection and a few photographs. It’s my pride and joy. Like I said, this baby can see right through cloud cover and stuff.”

“I hope so.”

“It’s not like the stars move or suddenly all wink out of existence. No matter what’s happened, you can count on this, Robbie—the stars *are* still there.”

But they weren’t.

At first, Russ didn’t say anything. He fiddled with the telescope, staring through it, then adjusting various knobs. I watched him and waited patiently. I didn’t know anything about telescopes, so I figured I could help best by staying quiet and out of the way. His posture grew stiff, and he started muttering and cursing to himself. His breathing grew louder.

“Fuck me,” he gasped. “This is—”

“What’s wrong?”

Russ waved his hand, growing more agitated. Grunting, he bent over and picked up the telescope, then moved it to another spot on the roof. He stared back up at the black sky and moaned.

“Russ, what the hell is wrong?”

I turned the flashlight on and directed the beam at his face. He turned to me, his mouth hanging open, eyes wide. He’d grown pale and seemed to be in shock.

“Jesus Christ, Russ! Are you okay? You look like you’re having a heart attack or something.”

“There’s nothing,” he whispered.

My heart rate increased. I had a bad feeling in my stomach.

“Well, like you said, the darkness might be some kind of cloud cover.”

“No. You don’t understand. I told you, this telescope can penetrate through shit like that. This ain’t some Wal-Mart special, man. This is a top-of-the-line unit. If there was anything up there, I’d see it—and there’s not. The stars are fucking *gone*, Robbie. And it’s not just them. The moon. The international space station. All the fucking satellites. You have any idea

how many satellites there are circling the Earth? And now they're not there anymore. They're all missing. It's like the darkness swallowed them, too. Like Walden is the last thing in creation, floating all by itself in some black void..."

He trailed off, his voice choked with sobs.

"They can't be gone," I whispered. "If they were gone, then we'd be dead. We couldn't live without the sun."

"No, we couldn't. And if the moon suddenly disappeared...well, let's just say it would fuck this planet up in ways you can't even imagine. But see for yourself. They're not there."

"There has to be a logical explanation."

If Russ heard me, he gave no indication.

"What has happened?" he muttered. "Oh my God, what is going on here?"

Before I could respond, a gunshot boomed in the darkness. It sounded very close, and both of us ducked instinctively. The echoes rolled across the roof, and my ears rang.

"Damn, that was close."

Russ nodded. "Way too close. Next door or downstairs."

I ran to the edge of the roof and peered over the side. The street was mostly deserted now, but there was still a small crowd huddled around one of the burn barrels. They were all staring and pointing at our building and the one next to us—the one where Tom Salvo, the guy I'd met that morning, lived.

Russ drew alongside me. He seemed to have recovered from his shock, at least momentarily.

"See anything?" he asked.

"Those people down there are pointing at our building. I need to check on Christy. You'd better check on Cranston."

I started toward the fire escape, but Russ stopped me.

"Be careful," he whispered. "If somebody broke in, they could still be down there. And I'm betting they're armed, because I know you and Christy don't own a gun, and I doubt Cranston does either."

"Shit. You're right. Do you own a gun?"

He nodded. "Several. I'll get them. No sense going into this unprepared."

“But Christy—”

“You can help her a lot better if you’re armed, Robbie.”

“Come on.”

Leaving our mugs behind, we went as fast as we could in the darkness and made our way back into his apartment. Russ hurried to his bedroom closet and pulled down a pistol box. He unlocked it and pulled out a .357 and a .38, both Taurus revolvers. He flipped open the cylinders. Both weapons were loaded. He handed me the .38.

“Hollow points,” he said. “Extra stopping power. Aim for the biggest part of the body, like the chest or abdomen. No warning shots, and no shooting to wound. If you’re gonna pull the trigger on somebody, then you should be prepared to kill them. Okay?”

Swallowing, I nodded. “Okay. Jesus Christ...”

“Just be careful. There’s no safety on a gun like that. Don’t put your finger on the trigger unless you intend to pull it. You know how to shoot, right?”

I nodded again. “Yeah, I’ve been to the range a few times.”

“Then let’s go.”

He took the flashlight from me and turned it off. We made our way downstairs, trying to move as quietly but quickly as possible. We paused at my apartment. The door was still shut, and there were no sounds from inside. Russ put a finger to his lips, nodded at me, and stood to the side. I reached for the doorknob. It seemed to take a lifetime before my fingers closed around it. Russ raised his pistol. I opened the door and Christy slapped me hard enough to make my face sting.

“Ouch!”

“Where the hell have you been, Robbie?”

Russ exhaled. “Jesus Christ, Christy, I almost shot you.”

She glanced at the gun in my hand and then at Russ’s. Her eyes widened in surprise. “A gunshot woke me up. Was that you guys?”

“No,” I said. “But it was very close. We thought...well, never mind what we thought. Just stay here and lock the door.”

“What? No way, Robbie. You’re—”

“I don’t have time to argue with you, goddamn it. Just stay here, keep your voice down, and lock the fucking door.”

She reeled backward as if I'd hit her. That was fine by me. My cheek still stung from where she'd slapped me, so I figured that made us even. Deep down inside, I felt a twinge of guilt and regret, but they were swallowed seconds later in a wave of adrenaline, fear, and anger.

Or looking back, maybe it was something else that had extinguished them.

"Stay here," I told her. "We'll talk about this when I get back."

"Be careful."

There were tears in her eyes, and after she'd closed the door, I heard the deadbolt slide into place. Then came the soft sound of crying. That made me feel guilty again, but the emotion soon vanished, replaced once more with something a little more violent. The strangest part was that those darker emotions were somehow comforting. I fought the urge to embrace them.

Russ and I descended to the first floor, making no effort to conceal our footsteps any longer. If there was an intruder in the building, then they'd probably heard Christy's outburst anyway. He turned on the flashlight as we reached the bottom of the stairs. Cranston's apartment door was shut. We stood in front of it, listening. I reached out and tried the knob. The door was locked.

Russ leaned in close and called, "Cranston?"

There was no answer.

Russ raised his voice a little louder. "Cranston? You in there?"

Still no response.

"What should we do?"

Russ shook his head, shrugged, then knocked on the door with the barrel of his handgun. It sounded very loud, and I glanced around nervously.

"Cranston? It's Russ and Robbie. You okay?"

A floorboard creaked behind the door. "Who's there?"

"I just told you. It's Russ and Robbie, from upstairs. There was a gunshot."

The door opened slightly, held in place by a chain. Cranston peered out at us with one red, bleary eye. I smelled booze on his breath. The door opened wider. Candles flickered behind him, dancing across the walls. I caught a faint hint of patchouli oil and incense.

“I heard it, too,” he said. “I think it came from the building next door. What’s going on out there, man?”

“We don’t know,” Russ admitted, “but we intend to find out.”

“Be careful. Earlier, I went to the grocery store to get some things. The line was out the door and people were starting to fight over groceries. Some of them started looting. Just taking stuff without paying for it.”

Russ and I glanced at each other.

“The streets aren’t safe anymore,” Cranston continued. “I saw a carjacking on Maple, and I heard that a girl was gang raped behind the car wash.”

Russ shook his head in disgust. “You want to come with us? There’s safety in numbers.”

Cranston seemed surprised. “No, I don’t think so, man. There’s a presence hanging over this town. It came with the dark. Hell, maybe it *is* the dark. I don’t know. But whatever it is, I can feel it. I was meditating earlier—you guys know I’m into TM, right? Transcendental Meditation?”

We nodded.

“Well, I felt something while I was meditating. Something watching me. I couldn’t shake it. And even though I didn’t hear anything, I started getting the urge to do things. Like somebody was in the room with me, whispering them in my ear.”

“What sort of things?” I asked.

“Bad things. Stuff I’d never do in a million years. It’s bad karma, man. I’m sure that you guys feel it, too. Whatever this is, it’s affecting everyone. I think it’s safer to be alone right now, rather than with other people. No offense.”

“None taken,” I said. “Just stay inside and lock your door. And do me one favor? Keep an ear out for Christy, okay?”

He smiled. “I can do that.”

“Thanks.”

“You guys be careful. Don’t get shot.”

Russ grinned. “We’ll try our best.”

We stepped out into the dark street. The group of people was still standing around the burn barrel, but their attention was no longer on the twisting flames. All of them were looking at Tom’s building and speaking amongst themselves.

“Hey,” I called. “Anybody know what happened?”

One guy with piercings in his face and a red Mohawk shrugged. He looked bored and annoyed.

“Gunshot,” he grunted.

“Thanks for your help.”

If he noticed the sarcasm in my voice, he didn’t react. Instead, he just shoved his hands into his pockets and turned away. I stared at his hairstyle a moment longer. It had been a long time since I’d seen a haircut like that. He noticed me staring and shuffled his feet, obviously uncomfortable.

“You got a problem?”

“No problem,” I said.

Russ and I started up the porch stairs to Tom’s building. They creaked under our feet. The shades were drawn, and we couldn’t see in any of the apartment windows. One of the group yelled after us.

“You guys ain’t going in there are you?”

“Yeah,” Russ said. “We are.”

“How come?” This time, the speaker was the guy with the Mohawk.

“Somebody might be hurt.”

“So?”

Ignoring him, Russ shined the flashlight on the front door. It was closed, but when we tried the knob, it was unlocked. I checked the mailboxes in the foyer and found the one for Salvo. His apartment number was listed on the front with a piece of yellowed masking tape. We knocked on his door. There was no answer. We tried two more times before experimenting with the doorknob. It, too, was unlocked. Swallowing hard, I opened it and we went inside.

The first thing I noticed was the smoke. It hung heavy in the air, tickling the back of my throat and making my eyes water—a burnt smell. Cordite. Russ must have smelled it, too, because he pulled his shirt up over his nose. Then he shined the light around. The room was dark, and it was hard to see anything clearly in the murk. Finally, the flashlight beam glanced across a pair of shoes. Russ shined it upward.

We both gasped.

Most of Tom Salvo was sitting in a threadbare green recliner. The rest of him was splattered across the wall behind the chair, dripping from dusty, crooked picture frames and running down the dingy white walls. Steam rose

from the body, like breath in cold air. Some of his hair was singed. The rest of it was slicked down with gore. He'd pissed and shit himself. The stench was almost overwhelming. A picture album lay in his lap, and the stock of a deer rifle rested between his legs. What remained of his head had slipped down the barrel a bit, as if he'd been trying to deep throat the weapon. The tip of the barrel poked out the bloody hole in the back of his head.

I choked down bile and put a hand over my nose. "Jesus fucking Christ."

"Yeah," Russ agreed. "You know him?"

"Not really. I met him earlier today, when it first happened. His name is—was—Tom Salvo. He was worried about his kids."

"Do they live here with him?"

"No, they live with their mother. I'm not sure where, but I don't think it was here in Walden."

"Know if he had a girlfriend or anything?"

I shook my head. "Why?"

"Because we should check and make sure there's nobody else here. What if he...what if he killed them before killing himself? You know, like a murder-suicide kind of thing."

"Maybe. I don't know. I got the impression that he lived alone."

I considered grabbing the deer rifle but hesitated. It was covered with gore, for one thing. For another thing, part of me was still clinging to the idea that this entire situation would be over soon and that things would return to normal. If they did, then I didn't want to disturb a crime scene. But even as I thought it, I knew damn well that the cops wouldn't be investigating this.

Russ crept closer to the corpse, staring at it intently. His eyes were wide, and he was breathing heavy. His nose made whistling sounds. He licked his lips twice and blinked.

"I've never seen a dead body before."

"Me neither. Well, I mean, I saw my grandfather, but that was different. He hadn't..."

I motioned at Salvo, unable to finish the sentence. Russ suddenly turned away and made a retching sound. He hurried to the corner and turned the flashlight off while he puked. I guess he didn't want me to see him. Immediately, we were plunged into pitch-black. I could hear his vomit

splattering on the floor, but I couldn't see it. I couldn't see anything at all. For the first time that day, I was grateful for the darkness, if only so I didn't have to look at Tom's corpse.

Outside in the night, someone else laughed—high-pitched, warbling, and maniacal.

Or maybe it was the night itself that was laughing.

When the laughter turned into screams, I barely noticed. Already, I was growing used to them.

## CHAPTER NINE

I don't know if Tom Salvo was the first to die that evening, but he certainly wasn't the last. By the time the hands on the clocks got around to the hours we used to refer to as morning, nine other people were dead. And those were just the ones I knew of through rumor and gossip the next day. I'm pretty sure there were probably more—murdered by their own hand or the hands of others, but with no one to miss them after they were gone and their corpses not discovered. And let's be clear, I'm not counting the people who had gone out into the darkness. I'm talking about those of us who had stayed behind in Walden.

That first night, there were ten that I knew of.

It grew from there.

One of the dead was Chief Seymour Peters, he of the unfortunate name. Whatever his plan had been for our survival, it had died with him. Apparently he'd had a heart attack a few hours after his men failed to report back from the next town. Same old sad story—high blood pressure combined with the stress of an unimaginable situation. The way I heard it, his death might have been preventable if they'd been able to get him to the hospital, but of course, nobody was brave enough—or foolish enough—to take him by then. The hospital lay on the other side of the black veil, and word had gotten out—once you crossed that barrier, you didn't come back. His death was the only one that stemmed from natural causes that night. It also explained why there were no more community updates or meetings after that. I guess nobody else from the fire company wanted to step up to the plate. Or maybe there weren't any of them left.

In addition to Tom Salvo, two other people committed suicide. One woman cut her wrists and bled to death in an empty bathtub. The candles around her burned down to stubs. And a teenage girl whose parents had never come home from work hung herself. She made a noose from an extension cord and climbed on a chair. She was found a few hours later by an elderly neighbor who was checking in on her. Pictures of the girl's

parents lay at her feet. I guess they were the last thing she saw before she jumped.

The other victims of that first dark night were all murdered. One had his head caved in by a drunken friend wielding a tire iron. The way I heard it, the two men had gone to the high school's football field with a case of warm beer. I'm not sure what they were doing there, but at some point, they got into an argument. A bunch of people witnessed the murder, but the friend ran off before anyone could stop him. Nobody knew where he was now. Probably out there on the loose, hiding in the shadows. And there were a *lot* of shadows to hide in. Maybe the shock of what he'd done had set in, and he was hunkered down and feeling remorseful. Or maybe the thrill had overcome him, and he was just waiting to see what else he could get away with.

In the case of the second murder, a jealous lover stabbed his girlfriend to death out on the golf course. They were married, but not to each other. Both of their spouses had gone to work outside of Walden that morning. Neither of them had returned. The man had been overjoyed. The woman had not and feared for her husband's safety. Apparently this sent the lover into a jealous rage. She fled from him, heading out onto the golf course, and he chased after her with a butcher knife. He stabbed her seven times at the fourth hole, in front of witnesses who'd been attracted by her screams. With no cops around to arrest him, the crowd exacted a vengeance of its own, beating the murderer to within an inch of his life. Then they drove him to the edge of town and threw him out into the night. The darkness finished him off. They left before his screams had faded.

The third killing was especially chilling. Remember the house I saw with the Christmas lights? Well, it turned out that I'd been right. The guy who lived there had a working generator. Except that he didn't live there anymore. He didn't live at all. He'd been murdered by a group of thugs and tossed out into the street like trash. Then the killers had barricaded themselves inside his house, along with the generator and what witnesses said were several months' worth of supplies. They were heavily armed, obviously ruthless, and nobody felt like storming the place. What was the point? Avenging somebody that none of us knew? Stealing the supplies for ourselves, when the stores were still full of stuff? Nobody said it out loud,

but I think the general consensus was that if they wanted the generator and supplies that bad, then they were welcome to it.

The other murders were a little more mysterious. A guy was found lying in the middle of Rosemont Avenue. He'd been shot in the groin, abdomen, and chest. Lots of people heard the gunshots, but nobody knew who shot him or for what reason. Another man was found in the front yard of an empty house with a pair of hedge trimmers sticking out of his throat. They'd been driven in deep, so that only the handles were visible. There were no witnesses and no clues. Nobody knew either of the victims' names.

I heard about all of these throughout the day, as Russ and I scavenged for supplies. With no newspaper, television, radio, or internet, we had to get our news the old-fashioned way—through gossip. The deaths were the talk of the town. Strangers who didn't even know each other's names were all too willing to share the gruesome facts, as if discussing the Super Bowl or the presidential election. The details changed, depending on who was doing the telling, but the facts remained the same. Walden was finally showing its dark side.

We'd left the building early that morning, intending to grab what we needed—paying for it if we could but looting it if we had to—and then get back to the apartment as quickly as possible. Cranston had been right the night before. Already, the town had soured, and it wasn't just the murders either. The mood in Walden was different. We weren't the only ones who noticed it. The very air itself felt heavy and oppressive, and the darkness permeated everything. We didn't want to be outside, moving amongst it, any more than we absolutely had to. It fucked with my head. My body knew it was supposed to be daylight, but that oppressive darkness felt like it was swooping down on me, ready to crush me to the pavement at any moment.

Christy made me a list of things she thought we needed (and I'm glad she did, because it would have never occurred to me to get her shit like sanitary napkins or skin moisturizer. Made sense, though. Even during the apocalypse, women still have their periods and dry skin. Christy was downright habitual about using moisturizer every morning).

We invited Cranston to go along with us, but he politely refused, preferring to stay inside. We didn't offer to pick up anything for him. By then, both Russ and I were feeling grumpy and out of sorts. Neither of us

had slept more than a few hours. Every time I'd closed my eyes, I'd seen Tom Salvo's steaming corpse. But despite our moods, we were also both conscious of *why* we felt that way, and thus, we were able to keep a hold on our more negative emotions.

Then we went shopping.

As predicted, my car hadn't returned, and Russ was low on gas, so we walked. We made sure to take the pistols with us. I stuffed the .38 in my pants, wedging it between my jeans and the small of my back. It felt cold and hard against my skin. It made me a little nervous, knowing that it was loaded. I was worried it might accidentally discharge and blow my balls off, but Russ reassured me that as long as I was careful and treated the weapon with respect and caution, that probably wouldn't happen. Russ wore the .357 in a holster on his belt, right out in the open. A few people glanced at it, but there were plenty of other passersby who had also ventured out armed with handguns and rifles. It was just another reminder of how quickly things had changed.

We started with the grocery store. It was packed with more people that morning than I had ever seen. There were more shoppers than the presnowstorm, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Passover, and Memorial Day crowds all rolled into one. I call them shoppers, but the truth is, they were anything but that. Shopping is done in a semiorderly fashion, and implies that the customer pays for their goods. This was something much more chaotic.

There were a few store employees still on hand—cashiers and stockpersons, but no management. The employees were there for the same reason as the rest of us, and not once did they try to stop anyone. They were too busy loading up on stuff. The cash registers stood unmanned. Two men pried at one of them with a crowbar, trying to open it and get at the cash inside, but everyone else focused on the necessities.

The mob tore through the store with flashlights in hand, pouring down the aisles and knocking over displays. Their cries varied from elated yells of triumph to angry accusations, and every few minutes, those arguments turned to furious threats shouted above the cacophony. Fistfights and scuffles broke out. Sometimes, people stepped in and broke them up. Most times they didn't. Instead, bystanders took advantage of the distractions and loaded up on stock. Blood flowed—busted lips, broken noses, sprains, and a

few shattered teeth. Nobody was killed, but it was an ugly scene, nevertheless—made uglier by the fact that Russ and I were a part of it.

Understand, we had no qualms about what we were doing. We were there for the same reason the rest of those people were—to take off with anything that wasn't nailed down. If someone had been manning the cash registers, then I guess we would have paid. But nobody was, and that was fine by us. We were looters, plain and fucking simple, and it felt *wrong*—at least until the darkness or human instinct or whatever it was took over and nudged us to ignore our conscience and follow our base, animalistic instincts.

Our guilt vanished. Maybe it was the darkness, or maybe it was just our own primal urges. Whatever it was, we surrendered.

After that, it was easier to just go with the flow.

And go with the flow we did. Russ and I didn't get into brawls with anybody, but we did holler at a few people, and Russ shoved some middle-aged dude who got in his face over which one of them had reached for the last package of toilet paper first. The guy wore thick glasses and one of the lenses was cracked. Russ told him that if he didn't back off, he'd crack the other lens. Wilting, the man turned away and mumbled about checking the employee restroom to see if there was any toilet paper left there. I glimpsed a smile on Russ's face as he walked away. It matched my own.

I'd brought along an old canvas gym bag, and Russ had two big suitcases. All of the grocery carts had been taken, so we commandeered a flat cart from the rear of the store and went foraging. We filled our bags first, then sat them down on the cart and piled more stuff on top of them. We concentrated on things that would last awhile, rather than perishables, but as we passed by the meat department, Russ grabbed some steaks and pork chops that hadn't gone bad yet.

"What are you gonna do with those?"

He smiled. "Cook them on top of my kerosene heater."

"You'd better do it tonight. They'll be spoiled by tomorrow."

"Then I guess you and Christy better come up for dinner tonight and help me eat them."

"It's a date."

"Cool. Maybe I'll invite Cranston, too. He's been holed up in his apartment. It'll do him good to get out."

“I don’t know, Russ. He seems pretty scared.”

“We’re all scared. Might as well be scared together.”

We rejoined the communal ransacking, filling our flat cart and bags with canned vegetables and fruit, tins of sardines and tuna and other processed meats, jars of pickles and olives, dried goods like cereal and crackers and rice, canned soups, instant oatmeal, powdered milk, bottled water and soda, juice from powdered concentrate, batteries, matches and lighters, first aid supplies, various vitamins, toiletries (except shaving cream—remember, I told you earlier, some idiot had looted all of that already), and anything else we could find. We avoided the pharmacy because it was being ransacked by a rough-looking group. I snagged an entire case of those instant noodles—the freeze-dried ones that come in those cups that you just add water to. I also remembered to get some of the tea that I’d had at Russ’s the night before. A lot of the shelves had been picked through, and there was much hustling and elbowing, but we still managed quite a haul. We cut through the produce section, and I took some bags of potatoes and onions, hoping that as long as I kept them cool, they’d stay good for at least a few weeks. I thought about grabbing a charcoal grill and some bags of charcoal, but couldn’t find any. Either they’d already been taken, or the store hadn’t had any on display, due to the time of year.

As an afterthought, we turned down the greeting card aisle and I stopped in front of the paperback rack. It was one of the only sections in the store that wasn’t besieged with people. I guess that during the end of the world, people don’t have time to read. That was fine with me. I grabbed dozens of paperbacks—romance, mysteries, horror, westerns—anything that I thought might appeal to Christy or myself. Shrugging, Russ followed suit, and took a few men’s adventure novels and some magazines—everything from *Newsweek* to *Modern Bride*.

I was bemused by his magazine selections. “I didn’t think you were much of a reader. At least, not of bridal magazines.”

“Sure, I read. I prefer nonfiction and sci-fi, but I guess I’ll need to start reading whatever I can get. There’s not much else we’ll be able to do, as long as the power’s out. And when I’m done, I can use them for kindling. Or toilet paper.”

“Yeah, but *Modern Bride*?”

He grinned. "It's not too late for me, Robbie. I might still get married again some day."

Laughing, we headed for the exit. The cart was noticeably heavier than when we'd started. Someone had propped open the automatic doors, and a throng of people moved in and out. It was getting really hot inside the store, and I wished the air-conditioning was working. There was no breeze. It occurred to me that I hadn't felt the wind since the darkness had come.

A disheveled guy in a dirty leather jacket tapped me on the shoulder as we pushed our flat cart toward the doors. I flinched, expecting trouble. He must have seen me tense up, because he apologized with a nervous chuckle.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to spook you."

"It's okay. Can I help you?"

"The batteries are all gone," he said. "Did you guys get any?"

I nodded, unsure of his intentions.

"Want to trade something for them?" With his flashlight, he motioned to his own shopping cart, which was overflowing with stolen goods. "I've got all kinds of stuff here. What do you need?"

I winced. His breath smelled like he hadn't brushed his teeth in the last day. But then again, neither had I.

"We've got everything we need," Russ said. "Sorry, man."

"Oh, come on. I only want a few. Let's make a deal. See, my kids are bored and all their toys run on batteries. I just want enough to keep them occupied until things return to normal. They can't go to school and I don't let them go outside. They're just sitting around inside the house all day, climbing the walls. You know?"

We nodded without responding.

"My daughter has this Dora the Explorer doll," he continued. "You know, the cartoon? It walks and talks and plays music when you turn it on, and she's run the batteries down."

"I'm sorry," Russ repeated. "But we can't spare any batteries."

I started to push the cart past the man, but he stopped us. He shoved his flashlight between his arm and side and reached into his pocket. Russ and I both jumped, expecting him to pull out a knife or a gun. But he didn't. Instead, it was his wallet. His hands shook as he fumbled with a few crumpled bills.

“Please? I can pay you. I’ve got money. Just give me four triple A’s. I’ll give you twenty bucks. How does that sound?”

“No.”

“No? How about forty bucks, then?”

“He’s telling the truth,” I said. “We really can’t spare any.”

“Fifty! Now come on, fellas, you’re not going to turn down fifty dollars for four little batteries are you? You’d have to be crazy not to take a deal like that. It’s for my daughter.”

I fought back my annoyance. “Look, even if we *could* spare some extra batteries, money’s no good. I mean, look around you. It’s not like anyone’s paying for this shit. And as for the stuff in your cart, we already have all we need. You’ve got nothing we want.”

“Well, what *do* you want?” He sounded defeated. “Just tell me that.”

“Got some gasoline you want to trade? We could use that. Or kerosene, maybe?”

“No. I tried filling up my Explorer earlier, but the pumps are down, what with the power being out. Nobody at the station knew how to siphon it from the tanks.”

“Well, there you go.” I tried pushing the cart away, but again, he stopped me.

“Please...”

“Let go of the cart, dude.”

“But this is all I’ve got. If money is no good, then what the hell am I supposed to barter with?”

“I don’t know. Look, not to be rude or anything, but that’s your problem. Have you checked the convenience stores, or the pharmacy?”

He nodded. “They’re just like this. Worse than this, even. Packed with people and almost empty already. The 7-11 had so many people crowded around it that I couldn’t get anywhere near the store. The cashier was screaming at them all, but nobody was listening. I saw some guy pushing a shopping cart down the street. It was full of cans of shaving cream. Isn’t that weird?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “That’s pretty weird. What did he look like?”

“I don’t know. He was naked, so I didn’t want to stare at him. I think he might have been crazy.”

“How about the hardware store?” Russ asked. “Have you tried there? They have batteries, too.”

“No.” The man shook his head in frustration. “That’s all the way on the other side of town, and I don’t want to leave my wife and kids home alone for that long. All I need is four. Two, even. I can make due with two. It’s for my daughter.”

“Yeah,” Russ replied. “You told us that already.”

“Well, then help me out. Please?”

The urge to punch him came over me suddenly, and its intensity was frightening. Fist clenched, I stepped toward him, intending to pop him right in the mouth. I saw it clearly in my mind. Me hitting him. Him hitting the floor. And then Russ and I stomping him until we heard his ribs snap, one by one. Until the broken shards jutted from his skin. Until we felt his teeth shatter beneath our heels. Until he coughed blood. Until his nose caved in and his eyes popped out. Until he stopped his fucking whining, after which we’d help ourselves to the contents of his shopping cart. Until he was dead. Mangled.

Pulped.

The images sickened me, but at the same time, they were exciting, too. I remembered what Christy had said the night before—how she’d gotten turned on when she thought about hurting me. I licked my lips and took another step. The man must have seen something in my expression or body language because he stopped talking and hurried away with his cart.

Struggling with the competing impulses, I quickly dug through our loot and found a pack of batteries.

“Hey,” I called after him.

He turned and I tossed the package at him. The guy in the leather jacket flinched. Then his eyes widened in surprise. He caught the pack, fumbled with it, almost dropping both the batteries and his flashlight, and then glanced back up at me. His eyes were still wide, his expression one of stunned confusion. Sweat stood out on his brow, visible in the dim light.

“Th-thanks.”

“You’re welcome. What’s your name?”

“My what?”

“Your name.”

“O-ollie. Ollie Griffin.”

“Mine’s Robbie, and this is Russ. Introduce yourself next time, Ollie. Names are important. They were always important, I guess, but they’re even more important now. They help us know each other.”

“Yeah?” His look of confusion grew.

“If we know each other,” I explained, “then it’s harder to get mad when we disagree about something, and if we don’t get mad at each other, this situation will go a lot smoother for everybody. No need for things to turn violent. Know what I mean?”

He nodded slowly. “I think I do. It’s been eating at you, too, hasn’t it? You’re having visions? Urges?”

I nodded.

He sighed. “Thank God. I thought I was the only one.”

“Nope. We’re all in this together.”

I pushed our cart toward the door. Russ stared at me, incredulous, and then hurried to catch up.

“The fuck, Robbie?”

“What?”

“What did you do that for?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I didn’t give him your batteries. They were out of my share.”

“I don’t give a shit about the batteries. I’m just surprised. I thought for sure that you were gonna kick the shit out of him.”

“So did I.”

“I sure felt like it. I got this weird headache, throbbing right behind my eyes. All I wanted to do was kill the son of a bitch. Took everything I had not to jump him.”

“Me too. But we didn’t, so it’s all good.”

“But why didn’t we? Both of us had the urge to. Why didn’t we act on it?”

“Because human beings aren’t supposed to act that way.”

Russ laughed. “You really believe that, Robbie?”

I shrugged. “Maybe we’re subconsciously trying to make up for yesterday, with that mother and her baby taking our car. Maybe the darkness hasn’t completely claimed us yet.”

Then we went outside, and it was still dark, and I wondered if maybe we were just clinging to hope because we hadn’t yet realized that it had

claimed us after all. My spirits plummeted.

Russ must have noticed my mood. “And another thing?”

“What?”

“That was the worst Robert DeNiro impression I’ve ever heard.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Back there. ‘We’re all in this together.’ Somebody’s watched *Brazil* one too many times.”

“It’s a good movie. What can I say?”

We took turns pushing the cart. It was heavy and bulky and the wheels kept jamming every time we hit a branch or a stone or a crack in the sidewalk. Our stuff tumbled off of it several times. We passed other people—looters, like us, or frightened individuals looking for information, promises that help would arrive soon, or just a friendly face among the crowd of strangers. Some of them made small talk. Others ignored everyone around them. Some of the people looked dangerous. Most seemed scared, and one or two were almost catatonic, shuffling by like zombies, oblivious to everything else. I was a little surprised that no one tried to stop us. I mean, here we were, pushing this big-ass cart loaded down with stuff. Stealing from us would have saved someone a lot of time. A few passersby eyed our loot, but none made a move to take it. Maybe they were just as frazzled as we were, or maybe the .357 strapped to Russ’s hip was a deterrent. I don’t know. Whatever the reason, I was grateful.

One guy stood on the roof of his house as we passed by, shining a powerful, handheld spotlight—the kind that cops and hunters use—into the sky. The darkness swallowed the beam, just like all the others, but the man kept at it, staring longingly at the sky. We could hear him weeping from the sidewalk.

“They’re out there,” he shouted to no one in particular. “They’re out there, waiting.”

“Who?” Russ hollered.

“The aliens. They’ve been studying us for years, determining our weaknesses and probing our defenses. Now they’ve done this.”

Russ followed the man’s gaze and shivered.

“You thinking about the stars again?” I asked.

“Yeah. It really freaks me out, man. After everything that’s happened, I think that scares me the most. I could always count on the stars to be there,

you know? No matter what kind of a day I had, no matter how much shit life shoveled on top of me, I could come home at night and the stars would be waiting. But not anymore.”

“No,” I agreed. “Not anymore.”

“They’re out there,” the man on the roof shouted again. “They’ll be coming soon. This is the endgame.”

I gave the cart a shove and we walked on.

“You think he could be right?” I asked.

“Who?”

“That guy back there, up on his roof. You think he could be right about this being aliens?”

Russ shrugged. “Fuck it. Why not? It would make about as much sense as anything else I can come up with. Aliens. Government conspiracy. Who knows?”

When we got to the corner, we heard shouting. A man ran past us. Then another. Then two kids. Then a woman with her children. A crowd of people was clustered on the sidewalk and spilling out into the street. We tried to push our way through, but more people turned and ran past us.

Russ grabbed the arm of a passerby. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“The clerk inside the 7-11 started shooting people!”

“What?” Russ glanced around. “Why?”

Too late, I remembered what Ollie Griffin—the guy from the grocery store—had told us.

“They were looting,” the man said. “The clerk told them they had to pay, but the crowd just swarmed the frigging store. It was chaos. They swooped in and just started loading up on things—knocking displays over and breaking glass. He kept trying to stop them, but for every person he caught, five more rushed past him with their arms full. So he went behind the counter and pulled out a gun and opened fire. He dropped a bunch of people.”

“Jesus Christ.”

The man pulled free of Russ’s grip and hurried away. He hadn’t gone more than five steps when we heard a shot. The crowd scattered. Most of them were screaming or shouting. A few were laughing. Russ and I ducked low, glanced at each other, and then backed away with our cart.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he yelled.

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

Another blast went off, making me flinch. The crowd’s screams increased.

Russ frowned. “That’s somebody different.”

“How do you know?”

“That first shot sounded like a pistol. The one we just heard was a shotgun.”

“Maybe somebody returned fire?”

“I don’t think we should stick around to find out.”

We cut down a couple of side streets and alleys, making sure to stay clear of the 7-11, and then got back on our path. There were no more gunshots. Eventually, the shouts and cries faded. After we’d gone a few more blocks, Russ took over for me and pushed the cart. We were both sweating, but it wasn’t overly hot. Wasn’t cool either. In fact, the temperature didn’t seem to fluctuate much at all. It remained just about what it had been when the darkness first arrived.

“I wish it would rain,” I said. “Maybe if a strong enough storm came through, it would blow the darkness away.”

Even as I said it, I knew that I didn’t believe it. My words rang hollow. I was just making conversation, trying to change Russ’s mood the way he’d changed mine.

“It was supposed to rain yesterday,” Russ said. “At least, according to the weatherman. We were supposed to have scattered showers and thunderstorms all week. But we’re not. I don’t think the rain can get through...whatever that is.”

“It has to.”

“Let me ask you something, Robbie. Since this whole thing started, have you felt the breeze on your face? Have you heard the wind? Anything like that?”

“No. I noticed that, too. I was thinking about it when we left the grocery store.”

“There you go. I don’t think the elements can penetrate the darkness.”

“Well, then how are we breathing? If the rain or wind can’t get through, then what about oxygen? I mean, shouldn’t we all be dead by now? We’ve got air. And people have been burning shit all night in their

fireplaces and burn barrels. Where's all the smoke going? The exhaust from the cars? How come that's not floating around?"

"Fucked if I know," he admitted. "Maybe it goes into the darkness, just like everything else. Maybe it can penetrate the veil."

"If things can go into the darkness, then it stands to reason that they can come back out."

"That's not what happened yesterday. That woman and her baby. Those volunteer firemen. Everyone else that left. None of them have come back."

"But that doesn't mean they're gone forever. Like I said, air must be getting through, at least, or else we wouldn't be breathing."

"I don't know." Russ stopped pushing the cart and rubbed his eyes. "I don't know shit anymore. Nobody does."

"That Dez guy seemed to act like he knew something."

"The homeless dude? Christ, Robbie. He's just crazy. Nobody knows what's going on—least of all him."

"Just because somebody is crazy, it doesn't mean they're not intelligent."

"True, but it doesn't mean they are either."

I took over for Russ again and wheeled the cart around a broken bottle. A teenage girl approached us warily, then asked if we'd seen a brown and white cat. Apparently it had run away and she was trying to find it. When we told her we hadn't, she thanked us and quickly walked away.

"She shouldn't be walking around out here by herself," Russ said.

"No," I agreed. "She shouldn't. But getting back to what we were talking about a minute ago."

"How nobody knows what's going on?"

"Yeah. Maybe that's the problem. Nobody knows what's going on. And we don't find out what's going on because nobody's in charge. Nobody is calling the shots. We're all just running around like chickens with our heads cut off—worrying about ourselves but not thinking about the big picture. We need to get organized, you know? We can't just have store clerks blowing away people and girls out looking for lost cats while there are armed people on the streets. We need to restore order, and we need to find out what's really happened."

“Well, hell. Why don’t you run for mayor then? Maybe folks will listen to you.”

Russ’s tone was sarcastic, but I ignored the good-natured taunt and continued.

“Maybe I will.”

“You got a plan to get us out of this? Because if so, then you’ve got my vote, Robbie. I’ll be your damned campaign manager.”

“I don’t know about a plan, but I’ve got an idea. Maybe it will work, and maybe it won’t. But at least we’ll be doing something besides sitting inside our apartments waiting to see what happens next.”

“What’s it involve?”

“Let’s get this stuff home first. Then we’ll need to find some volunteers.”

“And then?”

“Then we go back out to the edge of town.”

Russ stopped walking. When I turned around, he was staring at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“What?”

“You want to go back to the darkness?”

Yeah.” I nodded. “That’s my idea. For starters, at least. After that, we’ll see. It all depends on what happens when we reach the town limits.”

“I don’t like the way this sounds.”

“Just hold off,” I said. “Let’s go home first. Then hear me out.”

## CHAPTER TEN

We made it back to the apartment building without anyone hassling us or trying to take our stuff. We knocked on Cranston's door, but he didn't answer, so the rest of us sat in my living room, and I told Russ and Christy what I was thinking. They were less than thrilled with my idea after I explained it to them. Christy tried for half an hour to talk me out of it. She was patient and understanding. Russ was a little bit more succinct.

"Fuck that noise," he said. "You're as crazy as Dez is, Robbie."

They got me to agree to sleep on it and wait until the next day, but that was a little victory. My mind was already made up. I just didn't tell them that.

After I gave him his gun back, Russ carried his share of the loot up to his apartment, leaving Christy and me alone. We went through our kitchen, cupboard by cupboard, setting aside everything with a short shelf life or expiration date so that we could eat it first, and then putting away all of the stuff from the grocery store. I felt a little better, knowing that we wouldn't starve to death for a while. Christy must have felt better too, because she continued her efforts at persuasion while we worked.

"Just answer me this," she said. "What's the point? Why are you doing this?"

"I told you why."

"No, I mean, what's the *real* reason? Are you really trying to help everyone, or is this just to make yourself feel better?"

"That's a hell of a thing to ask, Christy."

"I don't mean it like that. But think about it for a minute, Robbie. You feel guilty about yesterday. I know you do. And so do I. But helping people now isn't going to bring that woman and her baby back."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Means you'd get your precious fucking car back again."

She slammed a can of wax beans down on the counter. "That's not what I'm saying, and you know it!"

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound that way. It’s just the...” I waved my hand in the direction of the window. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I understand. Remember, I’m feeling those things, too.”

“All the more reason to try this,” I said. “We need to know more about what we’re up against because right now, we don’t know shit. People died last night. Right here, in their homes. Everybody is tense and on edge. Now, sure, some of that could be attributed to the situation in general. When something like this happens, some people are gonna snap. But it’s not just the situation, and we both know it. There’s more to it. Something out there is *making* us feel this way. It wants us to fight. It’s making us hallucinate—showing us dead people in the darkness. And there’s more.”

“What?”

I told her about what Russ and I had discussed, how the stars were gone and the rain wasn’t getting through the barrier (because I’d begun thinking of the darkness as just that—a black barrier separating us from everything else).

“There’s no easy explanation for any of this, outside of *Buffy* or *The X-Files*. That’s why we need to learn more about it.”

“But you know what could happen. I don’t want you going up to it again. Not after yesterday.”

“This time, I’ll be careful. I know what it can do now. If my grandfather appears again, I know to just ignore him. Please, Christy. Somebody has to step up. Someone has to help us. And if nobody else is volunteering, then I guess I have to. It’s not like I want to go back to the dark’s edge. But I don’t see a fucking choice here, babe.”

Pouting, she began putting the groceries away again. The conversation was over, and I knew that I had won. She didn’t speak her approval. She gave no sign of consent at all. She didn’t have to. Her silence was all the go ahead I needed. Live with Christy long enough and you’ll learn that. Oh sure, it also meant that I was in the doghouse and that I wouldn’t be getting laid for the next two weeks—but she wouldn’t leave me over it either.

She didn’t argue about it anymore.

She also didn’t demand to come along with me again.

I’d expected her to. Prepared for it, in fact. But she didn’t, and that bothered me in ways I can’t even explain. I didn’t know why it bothered me. What, just because she’s my girlfriend, she was supposed to come

along and watch me possibly die? That wasn't fair to ask of her, but I felt like asking anyway. Instead, I stacked cups of instant noodles on top of boxes of oatmeal and tried to ignore it.

We worked that way for a long time, and neither of us said anything. We didn't have to.

We each knew what the other was thinking, and those thoughts were dark.

As he'd promised, Russ invited us upstairs for dinner. He tried inviting Cranston, too, but our downstairs neighbor wasn't answering his door.

"You think he's okay?" I asked Russ. "He seemed pretty freaked out earlier. I didn't get the impression he'd just go wandering outside."

"He's probably asleep," Russ said. "Or passed out."

"Or too afraid to open the door," Christy suggested.

While Christy and I made ourselves comfortable, Russ put a frying pan on top of the kerosene heater and fried up the steaks and pork chops. The chops got burned and the steaks were half-raw, but they were just about the best thing I've ever eaten. We complemented them with a loaf of bread, wanting to eat it before it went bad. Dessert was some fresh pears and peaches. We ate them unwashed—just rubbed them a few times on our shirts and then chomped down. They had a few brown spots, but otherwise, they were still okay. The juice dribbled down our chins.

After we'd finished, Russ turned the heater off. I was relieved. It was stifling inside his tiny apartment. My underarms were sweating, and I idly wondered what Walden would smell like once everybody ran out of deodorant.

Russ suggested we adjourn to the roof, but Christy balked at the idea. When we asked her why, she just shook her head.

"Come on," I insisted. "It's cooler up there."

"I don't want to," she said. "The roof scares me."

"Since when? You've been up on the roof hundreds of times."

"You guys will just make fun of me."

"No, we won't," Russ said. "What is it?"

She sighed. "If we're up high like that, with nothing over our heads but sky, it just feels to me like the darkness is closer. Does that make sense? I'll

be able to feel it pressing down on me.”

We conceded that her discomfort was real enough and spent the evening playing cards instead. Christy went downstairs at one point, and returned with her bong and weed. There were only a few buds left in the bag, along with some seeds and stems.

“You ought to hold off, babe,” I said. “Who knows when we’ll get some again.”

“We’ll just do one.”

But we didn’t just do one. You know how it goes. We smoked and chilled, and talked about everything except what was going on outside. Russ insisted on saving the bong water, and poured it into an empty margarine container. He was really taking this conservation stuff seriously. When we’d all started to yawn, Christy and I excused ourselves and said good night.

“Your mind is made up already, isn’t it?” Russ asked as he walked us to the door. “You’re really going to go through with this tomorrow?”

Christy glared, waiting for my response. Her hands clenched and unclenched. She dug her fingernails into her palms.

Sighing, I nodded. “Soon as I wake up tomorrow, I’ll go out and find some help. Then we’ll give it a try.”

“How many people do you think you’ll need?”

“The more, the better. A dozen at least.”

“Think you’ll get them?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I sure as hell hope so.”

“Well, then make sure you wake me up. I’m going along, too.”

I promised him that I would. Inside, I was grateful. I knew that he was dead set against it, but the fact that he was coming along anyway meant a lot to me. I glanced at Christy, thinking she might change her mind now and volunteer as well, but she just thanked Russ for dinner and walked down the stairs. After a moment, I followed her. She stayed ahead of me, taking the stairs two at a time, and when I reached for her, she shrugged me off.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Sure doesn’t seem like nothing to me.”

“I’m tired. That’s all. It’s nothing.”

As we unlocked the apartment door and went inside, I heard a faint, mechanical rumbling sound from outside of the building. Wondering what it was, I followed Christy into the living room, trying my best not to bump into anything in the darkness. Without speaking, Christy went into the bedroom. A moment later, I heard the mattress springs squeak as she collapsed into bed. I walked to the bedroom. The mechanical sound was louder in there. I realized it was an engine—a big one judging by the sound. I stood in the doorway, staring at her silhouette. Christy was lying on her stomach, facing away from me.

“You sure nothing is wrong?” I asked, knowing full well that it was.

“Does it matter?”

I paused, taken aback by the question. “Well, of course it matters, hon.”

She rolled over and stared at me. “You’d already made up your mind about tomorrow. I asked you to think about it overnight, and you couldn’t even do that for me.”

“Christy...”

“Save it, Robbie. It doesn’t matter. You’re gonna do what you’ve got to do, right?”

“It’s not like that.”

“It sure as hell seems that way to me.”

“Somebody has to do something, Christy. I mean, what’s the alternative? Just sitting around here, getting high and waiting to see what happens next? No fucking thanks. You weren’t out there today. You didn’t see what those streets were like. People are fucking losing it, hon. It’s not Walden anymore. It’s like the Gaza Strip out there.”

She didn’t respond, but she didn’t turn away either. I shuffled closer, sat down on the edge of the bed, and stroked her hair. Slowly I felt her relax.

“What’s that noise?” she asked, changing the subject—something she often did when she didn’t want to argue anymore.

“I don’t know. I thought it sounded like a car engine. Want me to go check it out?”

Sighing, she shrugged. “If you need to. It’s not like I could stop you anyway.”

“That’s not true. If you don’t want me to look, then I won’t look. I’ll stay here.”

“No.” She rolled over. “Go ahead. It’s probably nothing. Just be careful, okay?”

“I will.”

I leaned over and kissed her forehead. Christy didn’t return the kiss. Frowning, I stood up. My knees popped. I walked to the door and glanced over my shoulder. She was facing away from me again.

I crept to the window, parted the shades with my index finger, and peered outside. There was a big rig parked along the curb in front of our apartment. It was just the cab; there was no trailer attached. Although the headlights weren’t on, it was easy to tell that the truck was still running. Exhaust belched from the pipes, and the windowsill vibrated from the idling engine.

“So that’s what it is,” I whispered aloud. “The fuck is going on, though?”

Wishing that I hadn’t given Russ his .38 back, I grabbed the flashlight and my wooden baseball bat. Then I crept down the stairs to the front door and stepped outside. The street was deserted, at least as far as I could see—which wasn’t far at all, given the absence of light. It was chillier outside than I’d thought it would be, and I shivered in the breeze. My arms prickled with goose bumps. I approached the truck cautiously, squinting, trying to see if there was anyone inside the cab. I saw a tiny orange glow and realized a second later that it was the tip of a burning cigarette.

I wondered what to do with the bat—hold it up and at the ready, or drop it to my side? If I held it up, whoever was inside would know that I was armed. But if they meant no harm, that would spook them. What if they had a gun? I let it drop to my side, holding the tip loosely. Then I raised the flashlight and shined the beam through the passenger’s side window. The figure looked up and shielded his eyes with one hand. The cigarette glowed brighter.

I heard an electronic hum as the window went down. Then the person inside the truck coughed.

“Can I help you, buddy?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just saw you sitting out here and thought you might need some help.”

“If you wanted to help, then what’s the baseball bat for?”

“Um...” I paused. “In case you wanted something other than help.”

The figure laughed, then broke into another cough. It sounded like he was about to hack up a lung. When the spell had passed, the laughter returned.

“Come on over,” he called. “But I’ll warn you. I’m armed. So no fucking around. Keep that bat at your side.”

“Fair enough.”

I crossed the yard and approached the idling cab. I noticed that the grass was dry. Normally, by this time of night, it would have been wet with dew. I wondered what that meant. As I drew closer, I got a better look at the driver. He was probably in his late forties or early fifties, thin, with a sharp, angular face. His cheeks and chin had salt and pepper whiskers, and his eyes were dark. He wore a grimy, battered hat on his head with a faded Peterbuilt logo.

“Well,” he said, studying me, “I don’t guess you mean any harm.”

I shook my head. “I don’t. Like I said, I was just concerned.”

“Curious, huh? You know what curiosity did to the cat.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard.”

“It’s something to keep in mind, given what’s been happening. Wouldn’t you say?”

I shrugged. “Probably. But curiosity can also keep you from getting killed.”

“Too true.”

We stared at each other for a moment, neither of us speaking. Finally, he broke the silence.

“Climb on in, if you like.”

I hesitated. He must have noticed.

“Or don’t, if you prefer. It ain’t no skin off my nose, either way.”

“What are you doing out here, Mr...?”

“Tony. Tony Giovanni. Ever see the commercials on the local cable access channel for Tony the Tow Truck Driver?”

“Sure.” I began humming the cheesy, familiar jingle.

“Yep.” He grinned. “That’s me.”

I glanced at the cab. “But this isn’t a tow truck.”

“No, it isn’t. This is my other truck. Can’t pay the bills with just towing—not in Walden, at least. I also do short hauls as an independent driver. Somebody stole my tow truck this morning. I spent all day driving around town, looking for it.”

“That sucks. Did you find it?”

He shook his head. “No. And no sign of it, either. If it’s still here in Walden, then it’s stashed inside a garage or something.”

“Any ideas who stole it?”

“Who knows? Maybe somebody that wanted to get out of town, but didn’t have a car of their own. I don’t know. I parked it out in the street in front of my house, same as I’ve done for the last fifteen years. I always lock it, of course, but I’ve never had any trouble. Nobody ever messed with it before. This isn’t Richmond or Norfolk. It’s Walden.”

“Not anymore,” I said. “I mean, it’s still Walden, but things are changing.”

Tony whistled. “You don’t have to tell me. You wouldn’t believe some of the shit I saw today while I was driving around.”

“We saw it, too.” I told him about what Russ and I had encountered at the grocery store and what happened on the way home. By the time I was done, I’d relaxed enough to join him inside the cab. He had a CD player. Travis Tritt played softly. I’ve never been much of a country music fan, but at that point, I was so grateful to hear any kind of music I didn’t mind. I relaxed a little and tried to enjoy the song. Tony offered me a cigarette and I accepted. The nicotine rush was instant. It felt good.

“I drove by the grocery store at one point,” Tony said, “and saw the crowd pouring out of there. You guys are lucky you got there when you did. I imagine it’s pretty much empty by now. The crowd got meaner later in the day. When I went by, I drove slow because I was checking out the parking lot, looking for my truck. So I got a good look at everything that was going on. There were lots of people fighting. And I saw a young couple being robbed at gunpoint. Some guys were taking all the stuff out of the couple’s shopping cart and loading it into their pickup truck. Made the couple lay down flat on the blacktop while they did it. There were people all around them, but nobody did anything to help. They didn’t even watch. Just went about their business.”

“Did you try to help?”

He sighed. “No. There were more of them than there was me. I was outnumbered and outgunned. And even if I hadn’t been...”

“You just didn’t feel like it, right?”

Tony’s brow furrowed. “You judging me?”

“Not at all. I’ve felt that way, too. Yesterday, I had a chance to stop a mother from taking her baby past the edge of town. Instead of doing that, I let her go. I don’t know why. I can’t explain it. All I know is that a feeling came over me, like nothing mattered. For a moment, it all just felt so futile and fucking hopeless, you know?”

Tony nodded. “I do. I thought it was just me. Thought maybe I was losing it.”

“If you are, then so are the rest of us because my friends felt it, too.”

“Any ideas what’s causing it?”

“The darkness, I guess. Other than that, no.”

“How can the darkness make us feel that way? It’s not like it’s a living thing.”

“Have you been out there to the edge of it yet?”

“Yeah. Like I said, I drove all over Walden today.”

“Did you...see anything when you reached the darkness? Hear anything?”

Tony nodded. “You know when they test the Emergency Broadcast System on radio and TV? That really long beep? And then they tell you that it was just a test and had it been a real emergency, blah blah blah?”

“You heard that?”

“Yeah. That sound has always given me the willies, ever since I was a little kid. Maybe it’s because I grew up in the seventies and eighties, during the end of the Cold War. I remember watching ‘The Day After’ when I was a kid. Been afraid of the Emergency Broadcast Signal ever since. Always thought it meant the world was ending. Several times I’ve had nightmares about it. Woke me up from a dead sleep, shaking and sweating. Here’s the weird thing, though. When I heard it today, it was only at the town limits. Each time I drove back into Walden, the sound stopped. So it had to have been coming from somewhere in the dark. And with the radios and stuff dead, I know I wasn’t getting it through them. Whoever was broadcasting it, the sound was loud enough to hear inside the cab of the truck and from all

directions. Didn't matter which side of town I was on—north, south, east, or west. The noise was there each time."

"Did you see anything? Maybe someone from the past or something? A loved one?"

Tony frowned. "No. Just the signal. Why?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You taken a good look outside lately, man? I'm ready to believe a lot of shit I wouldn't have believed in last week. Try me."

Realizing that my cigarette had burned down to the filter, I rolled the window down far enough to toss it out onto the sidewalk. Then I rolled the window back up again and took a deep breath. I thought about asking for another cigarette but decided against it. I didn't know how many he had left or when he'd be able to get more. Instead, I told him what had happened.

"The day before yesterday, my girlfriend, my neighbor, and me went out to the edge of town. Each of us saw somebody from our past. My neighbor, Russ, saw his ex-wife. Me and my girlfriend saw dead people."

"You mean ghosts?"

"Not exactly?"

"Zombies?"

"Oh, come on." I rolled my eyes. "Seriously?"

"Well, you *did* say they were dead."

"They were. But they weren't zombies or ghosts. The versions of them that we saw in the darkness weren't real. It wasn't them. It was something else, trying to trick us."

"What about your neighbor's ex-wife? Was she dead, too?"

"She was alive, at least before whatever it was that happened... happened. He doesn't know if she's alive now."

"So was she real? The version he saw out there?"

"No. It wasn't really her. She was just another illusion."

"And since all three of you saw this, I guess we can't chalk it up to your imagination."

"No, we can't. And we're not crazy either."

"I wasn't saying you were. Sorry if it sounded that way."

"No, it's cool. I know you weren't. In truth, I almost wish we were. Then maybe this shit would make more sense."

“Well, if it’s crazy you want, just stick around. The whole damn town is going nuts. You wouldn’t believe some of the other shit I saw today.”

“Like what?”

“Well, there was a fat naked guy standing in the middle of the street, clutching a beer and shouting at anyone who would listen to him. I had to swerve to keep from running the stupid son of a bitch over. He didn’t even blink. Saw another guy chasing a dog with a rake. A little kid—couldn’t have been more than eight or nine—swinging a kitten by the tail. No sign of his parents. He was just going round and round in a circle. The cat was screaming. Not howling, but *screaming*.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. And that ain’t all. I saw a woman jogging with her iPod—except that she was covered in what looked like either mud or dried blood, and she only had one shoe on. Lots of looting. People taking shit from other people’s houses. There was a guy standing in front of the comic book store wearing a mask and a bedsheet tied around him. Guess he finally gets to play superhero. And I saw a couple doing a sixty-nine in a front yard, oblivious to anything going on around them. Probably the weirdest thing, though, was this guy I saw pushing a shopping cart filled with nothing but cans of...”

I held up my hand and stopped him. “Let me guess. Shaving cream?”

Tony laughed. “How did you know?”

“He seems to get around.”

“Well, it doesn’t sound like you and your friends are doing that yet, so I’d say you’re not crazy.”

“Yeah. But something doesn’t seem right. I mean, sure, we’re in a bad situation. This is like some 9/11-style shit. But doesn’t it seem like people are wiggling out a little too soon? It’s not like we’ve been trapped here for months or anything. I’ve heard of cabin fever, and I know stress does strange things to people, but this seems...extreme.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing. Maybe it’s some kind of chemical attack. You know—they pipe gas into the town or something. Make us all go insane.”

“We thought of that, too. The Sons of the Constitution or Al Qaeda could certainly pull off some shit like that. But if so, then wouldn’t the

government have responded by now? Wouldn't the National Guard or somebody have come rolling into town?"

"Maybe we're quarantined."

I paused. "Shit. I never even thought of that. If we were quarantined, that would explain why nobody has come into town since it happened."

"Well," Tony said, stifling a yawn, "whatever it is, you guys be careful. I've got a feeling it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better."

"Worse than naked fat guys in the street? Impossible."

We both laughed, and then we shook hands. I invited Tony to stop by again if he wanted to and showed him which apartment was ours. He thanked me and said that he'd take me up on the offer. Then I excused myself and told him I had to get back to Christy. I paused as I stepped out of the cab.

"So can I ask you one more thing, Tony?"

"Sure. Ask away."

"Why were you sitting here? You never did say."

He shrugged. "I was just trying to figure out what to do next. This seemed like a quiet street compared to some of the others. Figured it was a good spot to do some thinking. Maybe I'll take another drive around town. See if I can find my tow truck. If not, maybe I'll go back out to the outskirts and see if the emergency broadcast signal is still there."

"Be careful, dude."

"Yeah, you do the same."

I went back upstairs. Christy was awake and asked me what had happened. I told her about Tony and everything he'd seen during the day. Then we curled up next to each other, spooning. Her warmth felt good. We didn't fight or argue. We just lay there. She pressed her back against my chest and I rested my hand on her hip.

We went to sleep in the dark and woke to the same.

Eighteen more people died while we slept. One of them was from natural causes—diabetic shock.

The others were murdered.

When I looked outside the next morning, Tony and his truck were gone.

The darkness deepened.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

After a quick breakfast of granola bars and dry cereal washed down with cold instant coffee, I decided it was time to try my plan. The first thing I needed to do was round up some more recruits. I'd forgotten all about mentioning it to Tony the night before and was disappointed in myself. He would have been a good person to have come along. He'd seemed levelheaded and interested in getting to the bottom of our situation. Instead of him, I now had to settle for whoever I could find out in the street.

Christy stayed inside the apartment. She was cordial to Russ and kissed me good-bye, but I could tell that she was still pissed off. She didn't try to stop me, but she didn't wish me luck either.

Russ and I went downstairs, woke up Cranston, and convinced him to come with us, assuring him that he'd be safe. He agreed. Apparently, after being cooped up inside his apartment, the old stoner was starting to get cabin fever.

The three of us walked outside. I had a weird moment where I held my hand over my brow, anticipating that I'd have to shield my eyes from the glare of the morning sun. It was always bright around that time of morning, glinting off rooftops and cars. But after a second, I realized what I was doing and lowered my hand. Cranston and Russ stared at me quizzically but didn't say anything. I grinned, embarrassed. Then we stepped onto the sidewalk. Across from us, a trash can had fallen over, spilling its rancid contents onto the pavement. A dog was rooting through the debris. It had a collar and tags around its neck, and looked well-groomed and well-fed. Probably someone's pet. But when we approached it, the dog growled like a feral coyote, baring its teeth and lowering its ears and tail. We stopped in our tracks. With one last snarl, the dog turned and ran away.

"You think it's impacting the animals, too?" I asked Russ. "You know, like it did us the other day?"

He shrugged. "Could be. Or maybe they're just reverting to their normal uncivilized state, too."

We started down the street. I noticed that a few of the buildings had broken windows or doors hanging open—their hinges and locks popped. They hadn't been like that the day before. I was sure of it.

There were five teenage boys hanging around the burn barrel on our street corner. Even though it was daytime, smoke and shadows obscured their faces until I got closer. One of them was occupied with a handheld video game system that still had power, and his attention was totally focused on that. But the rest of them looked up as Russ, Cranston, and I approached. One of them, a white kid whose baggy jeans hung low enough to expose three-quarters of his boxer shorts, stepped forward.

"Sup, dog? What you need?"

I tried to hide my smirk. I had nothing against the dude's fashion sense or slang or intentional grammar-mangling. I've had plenty of friends who did the same thing. But two things were immediately obvious to me. One, if I wanted these guys to help us, I'd have to convince this de facto leader, and two, their leader was an idiot.

"What's up," I returned the greeting. "You alright?"

"We solid, yo. Just chilling. Know what I'm saying? Got to wonder who these three dudes are, steppin' to us on our corner, though."

"Sorry for intruding."

"So what you want? You here to break bad? Know what I'm saying?"

"Not really," Russ said. "You sound like you're auditioning for *The Wire* or something."

The leader scowled. "What you mean?"

"I mean that I don't understand a goddamned thing you just said. What language are you speaking?"

"The fuck you been smoking, old man? You looking to get your ass stomped?"

I interrupted, before Russ could reply. "We need some help. I asked around and heard that you and your crew are some good people to have guarding your back."

He grinned. "Word. People sayin' that for real? It's true. Our set rules this motherfuckin' street. Don't nothing go on without us knowing about it. Know what I'm saying?"

I thought about pointing out that before the darkness came, the only place he and his friends ruled was maybe the high school—and even that

was doubtful. I swallowed my laughter and tried to appear impressed.

“I’m Robbie. This is Russ and Mr. Cranston.”

“‘Sup.” He nodded at Russ and Cranston, then motioned to his buddies. “I’m T. This is Irish, Stan the Man, Mad Mike, and Mario.”

All of them mumbled greetings, except Mario, who didn’t look up from his game. T slapped the back of his head, and he almost dropped the unit.

“Where your manners, dog? Say hello, motherfucker. Be polite and shit.”

“Yo, Tucker! You gonna make me blow this level! Been trying to get this shit for two days.”

“Fuck that game. And how many times I got to tell you? Out here on the street, you call me T. You feel me? Do I call you Phil? No, I call you Mario, motherfucker. So don’t be calling me Tucker anymore. Tucker is dead. Know what I’m saying? Tucker was my slave name.”

Russ cleared his throat. “Slave name?”

“Damn straight.”

Cranston seemed bewildered. “But...you’re white.”

“Shit.” T snickered. “You think I don’t know that, yo? Hell yeah, I’m white.”

“Don’t you think that calling yourself a slave might be disrespectful to those who are actually descended from slaves, man?”

“See, you thinking in terms of color, old hippie dude. We need to move beyond that.”

“But you’re talking about slavery,” Cranston persisted. “You’re making light of one of the most horrendous things ever perpetrated by mankind.”

“Slavery don’t know no color, yo. And I ain’t making light of it either. I was a slave to my parents and shit. A slave to my motherfucking school. A slave to all their fucked up rules. Know what I’m saying? But my parents ain’t come home from work, and school’s out forever, so now I’m free. I ain’t a slave no more.”

Cranston opened his mouth to respond, but then he shut it again and simply stared at the teen. He looked bewildered. Russ looked annoyed. I thought it was funny, myself.

T turned to Mario. “We got visitors. Say hello, stupid. Don’t be a dick.”

“Sup.” Mario, aka Phil, turned back to his game.

“We need your help,” I repeated. “You interested?”

“Yo, we for hire, if the price is right. Know what I’m saying? What you need done? And, more importantly, what you paying?”

“All in good time. First, I need to round up a few more people.”

“For what?”

“You’ll see.”

We didn’t have to wait long. The street began to fill, as people woke up and crept outside, staring up at the darkness with resignation—as if they’d hoped it would be gone. Many of them went back inside and shut their doors. Others snuck off into the shadows, probably foraging. A few of them gravitated toward us, looking for gossip or news. I noticed that nobody came out of the houses with broken windows or doors. I wondered if they’d been deserted before the looters had broken in, and if not, if there was anybody inside, injured or dead.

When we had about two dozen people within earshot, Russ hopped up on the hood of a parked car, raised his arms, and got their attention.

“Hey, everybody. Listen up! If you could gather around for a moment. This here is Robbie Higgins. He lives on this block, and he’s got something you ought to all hear.”

I felt my ears burn and my cheeks flush. I’ve never been one for public speaking. When I was in high school, my girlfriend made me try out for the school play our junior year. I got a part in this thing called *Scapino*. I don’t remember much of the plot—something about a bunch of Italians and two young lovers whose families didn’t want them to be together. I played the part of a waiter. I didn’t have any lines or anything like that. All I had to do was walk around in the background and bring food to the other actors while they delivered their lines. But even though I didn’t have to speak, I was still scared shitless each time I walked out on stage. I felt the same way now. The people in the crowd were all staring at me. My stomach fluttered and cramped. Suddenly, I had to take a massive shit. I clenched my ass cheeks together and took a deep breath.

Russ gave me his hand and helped me up onto the car. The hood buckled under my weight. For a second, I thought we were both going to

fall off. But we didn't. A few people laughed. Then the crowd fell silent again. I felt their eyes on me, and was afraid to look up.

"Make it good," Russ whispered. "And for the record, I still think you're fucking crazy and this plan sucks. But I've got your back."

"Thanks," I muttered as he hopped down.

I stared at the crowd. They stared back at me, their faces illuminated by flashlights and lanterns and chemical glow-sticks. In addition to T and his boys and Cranston and Russ, we had about two dozen other people. Men and women. Young people and old folks. Black, white, and brown. White-collar and blue-collar. If someone had asked me to describe the people of Walden, I would have taken a picture of the crowd and just showed them that instead. But despite their differences, they all had one thing in common. I saw it on their faces as I studied them.

Fear. They were all fucking scared.

And I knew how they felt because I was scared, too.

"Thanks. I appreciate you all giving me a moment of your time. I'm not a speech maker or anything. I was a pizza delivery guy until a few days ago. In fact, I think I recognize a few of your faces. Probably delivered to your house once or twice. Hope you tipped me."

I'd expected laughter, but nobody responded. They just kept staring at me. I gave a nervous little chuckle. Russ made a winding motion with his finger, urging me to go on. I took another deep breath and continued.

"We, uh...we know that something's happened, but we don't know what, exactly."

"That's a fucking understatement," a man in the rear said. "Tell us something we don't know."

The crowd laughed. A guy in the front pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Before he could light one, someone else snatched the pack from his hand and fled through the crowd, vanishing into the darkness. The man shouted in anger, but he didn't give chase. Instead, he just stood there sulking, his shoulders hunched, his brow furrowed. The crowd murmured among themselves, and I tried to get their attention.

"Yeah," I agreed, "it is an understatement. And that's our fucking problem. It wouldn't be an understatement if we had more information. We're all scared. People are dying. There's nobody in charge."

An overweight woman with shockingly red hair raised her hand. “I thought Chief Peters was in charge?”

“He’s dead,” someone else yelled.

“Bad people are roaming about,” I continued, trying to regain their attention. “We all saw what just happened to this man’s cigarettes. Chief Peters tried to do something, but for those of you who didn’t hear about it, he had a heart attack. Apparently, all the other volunteer firemen either gave up or left or...well, we don’t know what happened, do we?”

A few of them nodded. I started to feel a little more comfortable. My guts were no longer churning, and I’d stopped sweating. Slowly I let myself relax.

“We don’t know shit,” a man yelled.

I pointed at him. “Exactly! That’s what I’m trying to say. We don’t know what happened to the rest of our firemen, and we *should*. We should know a lot more than we do—about a lot of things. Everybody is running around taking care of their families or themselves, and that’s cool—I’ve done the same thing. In the last couple of days, I’ve done some shit that I’m not proud of. I bet some of you have, too. It’s okay. That’s to be expected. Survival instinct, right? When the shit hits the fan, we do whatever we need to do to survive. But how long can we live like that? How long before there’s nothing left to loot? How long before our cupboards are empty, and we start stealing from one another? Truth is, if you check out some of the buildings around us, it looks like somebody has been breaking into houses already. That’s not good. I don’t know how many of you have tried to leave town, but it looks like we can’t. We’re trapped here together, and we need to figure things out and start working together before things get worse. Someone needs to step up and be in charge.”

A Puerto Rican woman in the front said, “And that person is you?”

“No, I don’t mean me. Shit, I wouldn’t know the first thing about being in charge. But I *do* know that we’ve got to start thinking. We’ve got to learn more about our situation. All we know for sure right now is that it’s dark all the time and that anyone who went out into the darkness hasn’t come back, and that nobody is coming to help us.”

“Help will come,” the woman said. “We just have to be patient. Help always comes.”

“You tripping.” T chuckled. “Ain’t nobody coming to motherfucking save us. If there were, they’d have been here by now. Know what I’m saying? It’s just like when that hurricane fucked up New Orleans. They had to help themselves and shit.”

The crowd started to mumble among themselves again. As I’d spoken, more passersby had joined us. There were now maybe sixty people in the crowd, with more listening through their open windows in the houses and apartments nearby. I glanced up and saw that Christy was eavesdropping as well. She held the flashlight under her face so that I could see her expression. I gave her a short wave. She smiled at me, and I smiled back.

“Maybe,” I said, trying to get the crowd’s attention once more, “and maybe not. Personally, I’d love to see the National Guard come rolling into town. But that hasn’t happened yet, and we have to prepare for the possibility that it might not happen ever. There’s been no contact with the rest of the world that I know of. Does anyone know differently? Have any of you heard from anyone who was outside of Walden when the darkness came?”

They shook their heads or remained silent, their expressions sullen.

“So there you go,” I said. “I know you folks don’t want to hear this, but we might be the only ones left.”

“We are,” called a quavering but loud voice. “We are all that’s left. Everyone else is gone. All the people. All God’s creatures, big and small, in the Earth and above it. All gone.”

Heads turned, craning to see the doomsayer. I did the same. The sea of people slowly parted. Dez, the homeless guy, stood at the rear of the crowd, slightly removed from everyone else, with one foot propped up on a fire hydrant. It was hard to make him out in the shadows, but right away I knew it was him. His voice and strange way of speaking were instantly recognizable.

“I stopped it,” he said, “but everything else is gone. Now it’s just waiting for us. He Who Shall Not Be Named. Once it eats us, it can move on to the next world.”

“Yo,” T shouted, “what kind of drugs you on, brother, and how can I score some?”

A few people laughed, but most seemed annoyed. I couldn’t tell if they were bothered more by Dez’s ramblings or T’s taunts. I pressed on, trying to

keep their attention.

“Thank you,” I said, nodding at Dez. “That’s one theory, and that’s my point. We have theories, but not many facts. We know that it’s dark.”

“It’s not just dark,” Dez said. “It *is* the dark.”

I wondered how to respond to that, but people had started to ignore him again, and the crowd closed ranks. I quickly lost sight of him. I glanced at Russ, who just shrugged and shook his head.

A short, bookish-looking man raised his hand. “That...man might be right. I think I know what he’s trying to say. There’s something in the darkness. I tried to leave yesterday, after I heard about the people who’d been killed. There was something...waiting for me, so I turned around and came back.”

“What was waiting for you?” Cranston asked.

He turned red. “I’d rather not say.”

Cranston shrugged. “Bummer, man.”

“We experienced something, too,” Russ said, raising his voice. “Out on Route 711, at the town limits. Me, Robbie, and his girlfriend, Christy. We went out there when it first happened. We didn’t know what else to do so we took a drive to see for ourselves. I know it sounds crazy, but when we got to the edge of the darkness, we each saw something different. It was our loved ones—people we’ve known, long dead.”

“I saw that, too,” the redheaded woman volunteered. “My cat, Binkley. He was run over by a car three years ago. When I saw him yesterday, he looked just like he had before he died. He still had his collar with the little silver bell and everything.”

“Well, I didn’t see anything like that,” the short man said. “What I saw was something that I’m scared of.”

“What was it?” Cranston asked again.

“Yeah,” T shouted. “What you see out there, dog?”

“I told you that I didn’t want to talk about it!”

Cranston waved him off with one hand. “Then don’t keep bringing it up, man. You’re just freaking everyone else out, and there’s too much of that already.”

“Calm down,” I said. “Everybody just calm down a minute. This is a part of it, too—what’s happening right now; all this goddamned arguing. I don’t know about the rest of you, but we’ve noticed some...unusual

changes in behavior. Shit seems to piss us off quicker than normal. Stupid, little things. Am I right?”

Many in the crowd nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know if help is on the way or not,” I admitted, “but if this keeps up, there might not be any of us left to rescue if help does arrive. Something is playing with our emotions—ramping them up. Making them stronger, until we can no longer control them. We need to take charge—take control of what’s happening to us. We need to do it now. And the first step in doing that is to learn more about our situation.”

“So what do you propose, Mr. Higgins?” a man asked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it. We know two things about the darkness. First, everyone who’s gone into it hasn’t come back. Second, it shows us things. But we don’t know that those things can actually hurt us. So far, unless I’m mistaken, all they’ve done is appear and talk to us. And in some cases, it scared us. Anybody experience something different from that?”

They shook their heads. I pointed at the short man who’d refused to talk about his encounter.

“Did whatever it was you saw try to hurt you?”

He took a deep breath. “No. I think it was just trying to scare me.”

“And you didn’t actually go into the darkness, right?”

He shook his head. “I stayed on the edge. I went up the hill there behind the senior high school. See, somebody slashed all my car tires the first night. I don’t know why. Why are people doing any of the things they’ve been doing? Maybe it’s like you said. Maybe something is playing with our emotions and making us do bad things. Anyway, I figured I’d walk out of town. Get some air. Try to gain some perspective about what to do next. I made it to the top of the hill behind the school. I stopped to catch my breath. There was a...symbol of some kind, scratched into the grass and dirt. A picture, though I really didn’t understand what it was supposed to be. It was outlined with salt. I know it was salt because I ended up tasting a little of it, just to see what it was. But that’s all I know. I was so preoccupied with the symbol that I didn’t go any further.”

“See?” Dez called. “I told you all!”

“Okay,” I said, ignoring him. “So there’s some kind of...barrier, for lack of a better term. We saw a picture like the one you described, but it was

out on Route 711. The darkness stopped at the edge of it. I think we can assume that whatever it is in the darkness, it can't hurt us if we don't cross the barrier. It can fuck with us, but so far, it hasn't touched us. But we don't know what happened to everyone who left. So here's my plan. We get a bunch of us—the more people, the better—and we go out to the edge of the darkness, that spot where it becomes something more than shadow. We tie ourselves together really well, and then we make a human chain and—”

“Screw that,” a man said. “I want no part of this nonsense.”

He began walking away. A few more people followed him.

“Wait,” I shouted. “Listen!”

“Hear him out,” Russ hollered. “This affects you, too. All of you.”

Grumbling and shaking their heads, more people turned away.

“Yo.” T hopped up on the hood of the car with me, speaking quietly so that no one else would hear. “We ain't no punks, but we ain't stupid either. Ain't you ever seen *The Mist*?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “That's kind of where I got the idea from.”

“Well, if you saw that movie, then you know damn well how it turned out for those people. Ain't no way me and my boys are going out into that shit. Know what I'm saying?”

“I'll pay you a bottle of vodka, a bottle of gin, and two buds.”

His eyes widened. “Four buds—fat ones—and you got yourself a deal.”

I paused, considering how little weed Christy had left in her bag.

“Deal. But you've got to help me. Everyone is leaving.”

“I'm on it.” He turned around and faced the crowd, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Yo! Listen up, motherfuckers. This Robbie dude sounds like he be tripping, but he's right. And ya'll know it, too. That's why you're walking away. 'Cause you're scared. Well, we can't be scared no more. We need to be on top of this shit. Know what I'm saying? We all balls deep in this together. If we're all tied together with ropes and shit, ain't nothing gonna happen to us. This ain't the movies. If something does happen, we just pull each other out real quick like. My man here is right. For real. Know what I'm saying? We don't know what's in that darkness, but we know what the fuck is gonna happen if we just keep doing the same old same old. Motherfuckers be tripping, and it's getting worse every damn

night. How long before they knock on your door, looking to gank your shit and cut your throat in the process? You feel me?”

“Gank?” Cranston asked, confused.

“He means steal,” Russ explained. “At least, I think that’s what it means.”

“Straight up,” T said. “Me and my crew ain’t afraid of no darkness. We’ll go.”

“The hell we will,” Mario said. “Who sa—”

T shot him a look, and Mario quickly turned his attention back to his video game.

“We’re going,” T told the crowd, “and if the rest of you give a fuck about our hood, you’ll help too. Know what I’m saying?”

A murmur of assent rose, mingling with the grumblings from those opposed to the plan. But nobody was walking away anymore. I turned to T and stuck out my hand.

“Thanks.”

His grip was firm. “Word. Now you ain’t gonna stiff me, are you?”

“A deal’s a deal,” I promised. “I’ll hook you up. A bottle of vodka, a bottle of gin, and four fat buds. Count on it.”

“So you want us to risk our lives?” a man shouted. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“If we’re all tied together,” I said, “and something starts to happen, we can pull each other out before anyone is harmed. The strange stuff only happens in the darkness. As long as some of us stay on the other side of the barrier, we should be fine.”

The crowd argued among themselves for a while. Eventually we had about two dozen volunteers. The others voiced their support but had excuses for not accompanying us—children or pets depending on them and shit like that. I could understand those reasons, but I was still disappointed. Only a few people outright refused, which surprised me. I honestly hadn’t figured they would. All the negativity that had been in the air, infecting us all, seemed to have temporarily evaporated while I was talking. Now it was back—apparently with a quickness. One man told me that I was an idiot and deserved whatever happened to me out there. I told him to fuck off, and then Russ and Cranston jumped between us before I beat the shit out of him.

I asked for rope, and a few people said they had some at home. I sent them to get it. Another guy told me he had a pair of battery-powered walkie-talkies, and I asked him to retrieve those, as well. It was something I hadn't thought of, but now that he'd mentioned them, I agreed they would come in handy.

After everyone had their assignment, we agreed to meet back on the street corner in fifteen minutes. During that time, I went upstairs and got T's payment. Christy kept our stash in a Ziploc baggie inside an empty Partagas cigar box. We were almost out of weed, and when I pulled the four buds out of the bag, all that remained were a few smaller buds and lots of stems and seeds. I dropped the four buds into another plastic baggie. Christy blew up and shouted at me when she saw what I was doing, but I promised her that I'd get some more.

"Where, Robbie? You said yourself last night that we don't know when we'll be able to get more."

"I'll find some. I promise. It's Walden, honey. Lots of people smoke marijuana. Hell, I bet Cranston has some he can share with us. But we'll worry about that later. Right now, I've got other things to think about."

"Well, maybe you should think about me for once!"

I don't know if it was the darkness or just my true feelings, but I'd had it with her.

"Why bother?" I asked. "All you ever do is think about yourself. You don't need me to do it for you."

Christy reeled back like she'd been slapped. I felt a momentary pang of guilt. I opened my mouth to apologize, but she lifted her foot, pulled off her shoe, and flung it at me as hard as she could. I ducked, and the shoe soared over my head and slammed into the closet door. The other shoe followed it. This time, my reflexes were off and Christy's aim was better. The hard wooden heel struck me in the arm. I almost dropped the buds.

"Goddamn it, Christy! That fucking hurt!"

"Good, you cocksucker! I'm glad it hurt!"

"Oh, fuck you."

"No, fuck you, Robbie! You're a fucking asshole. I've had it with this shit. Don't you fucking come back here again. You can fucking sleep with your new friends outside."

She was still cursing me out when I left the apartment. I delayed only long enough to grab the bottles of booze from the kitchen. On my way down the stairs, I rubbed my sore arm and hoped my anger would subside. I needed my head clear for what came next.

Russ was waiting for me outside. He nodded, arched his eyebrows, but didn't say anything.

I sighed. "You heard that?"

"Yeah, I heard. Kind of hard not to."

"Shit."

"Don't take it too hard, and don't be mad at Christy. I imagine it wasn't really her talking, you know? It was..." He waved at the darkness. "...this. However it's fucking with our heads."

"I hope so, Russ. I really fucking hope you're right, because I can't take much more of that bullshit."

Fifteen minutes later, we regrouped in the middle of the street. A few of our volunteers must have had second thoughts because they didn't return. We waited for them a few minutes longer, but they still didn't show. In the end, we were down to thirteen people. There was me, Russ, and Cranston, of course, as well as T and his four friends (who were all very gung ho after receiving their payment and had already started in on both the vodka and the gin). Joining us was a sixth-grade English teacher, Ms. Stevens, who was about my age and very pretty despite the fact that she hadn't showered in several days and had no makeup on and her hair was stuffed up beneath a ball cap. Then there was an overweight network systems analyst named Clevon, who was also about my age and had apparently lived in Walden less than six months. Next came a guy wearing an *Earnhardt Lives* ball cap who introduced himself as Drew. With him was his buddy, Clay; and a woman named Anna. I recognized Anna from my delivery route. She was a short-haul truck driver who ordered pizzas from us on the weekends. I'd never known her name until now—just her address and her occupation (her rig was always parked outside). The three of them talked to one another with a familiarity that spoke of a longtime friendship. I guessed that both Drew and Clay were in their midforties. Anna was probably about the same, but the years—or the mileage behind the years—made her look older.

In addition to our human volunteers, Drew and Clay had brought along their hunting dogs—two beagles and a fat old black-and-tan spotted with

streaks of gray fur. Drew suggested to me that we send the dogs in first, after tying them to the rest of us. I had to admit, it was a pretty good idea, so I agreed.

Cranston sighed. "I say we do this now, Robbie, before I chicken out."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I guess we can't stall any longer."

People gathered in the street and peeked out their windows and doors, watching us leave with the same interest usually reserved for car wrecks along the highway. And who knows? Maybe that's all we were to them. Maybe they figured that we wouldn't be coming back and they wanted to witness our death march.

Dez grabbed my arm as we passed him. His body odor nearly knocked me over. It burned my nose and made my eyes water.

"Don't go past the runes," he whispered. "Don't break the pattern."

I shrugged him off. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I heard your speech."

Cranston, T, and Anna slowed to listen to our exchange.

"Weird guy," Anna muttered. "I hear tell he's a Satanist or something."

"Fucking retard is what he is." T chuckled. "Know what I'm saying?"

If Dez overheard them, he didn't react. I wondered if he was used to hearing such taunts and derision. I'd seen people making fun of him many times before.

"I put the runes at the four points," Dez told me. "North, south, east, and west. Then I put more at the points in between. It makes a line. An unbroken line. A pattern. The runes hold the darkness back. It can't cross them. But you shouldn't cross them either."

"You're talking about the graffiti on the road? Holy shit! You did that?"

Smiling, he nodded. "I knew the words. I made a barrier."

"Is that what the picture is supposed to be?"

"All magic is just words and names. Runes are words."

"I don't understand, Dez."

"That's okay. Nobody else does either. I understand for everyone. I have to."

Scowling, Anna muttered, "Witch."

She and T walked away. T seemed to have already forgotten about Dez, but Anna glanced over her shoulder and delivered one last jab.

“Goddamn Satanist is what you are.”

Dez pouted. His bottom lip quivered. He looked like he was getting ready to cry.

“Are you okay?” I asked, feeling bad for him.

He nodded.

“Look, they didn’t mean it. Okay? Everyone is just scared. Fear makes people say things that they don’t mean.”

Dez wiped his nose with his hand, then wiped his hand on his pants.

“It’s not fear,” he said. “It’s not fear that makes them mean. It’s the darkness. He Who Shall Not Be Named.”

“Robbie,” Russ called, “let’s get going before we start to lose our nerve.”

I cast one last glance at Dez, and then I turned away and walked on. Cranston hurried to catch up with me, and he cast a wary look over his shoulder.

“He still back there?” I asked.

“Yeah, man. He is. And he’s crying.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

None of us had a vehicle big enough to carry the entire group, and I didn't want to waste any more time by sending folks back home again to retrieve their cars. I was worried that if we did, we'd lose even more volunteers. So in the end, we walked. This time, instead of going out to Route 711, we went to the vacant lot behind the half-empty strip mall on Tenth Street. All of us had working flashlights, and Drew had brought along his walkie-talkies, as promised. He and Clay led the way, holding tight to the dogs' leashes. The animals kept their noses to the ground, sniffing and tracking. Their tails wagged back and forth, and their ears were up. They seemed happy.

"Them beagles will run off soon as we unleash them," Clay said. "They're good dogs, but let 'em get a whiff of a rabbit or a cat or something and they'll be gone like lightning. The black-and-tan would, too, except that he's too old. His joints bother him these days."

He unleashed a stream of brown spit all over the road. Then, still holding the dogs' leashes with one hand, he stuck his index finger into his mouth and prodded a wad of snuff out from his bottom lip. He flicked the wet tobacco onto the curb, and with the practiced movements of someone who'd done this one-handed many times before, he fished a round can of mintflavored Skoal out of his back pocket, removed the lid, and put a fresh pinch into his mouth. I'd never liked smokeless tobacco before, but the smell teased my senses now. Remembering how good the nicotine rush from the cigarette Tony lent me had felt, I considered asking Clay if I could bum a dip but decided against it. Last thing I needed to do right now was get sick off Skoal and spend twenty minutes throwing up behind the strip mall.

"You'd better slow down on that dip," Drew told Clay. "What are you gonna do if you run out?"

"That won't happen for a while. I got me a whole bunch of cans from the grocery store and the gas station. And my neighbor Dale dipped, too. He

was one of those who never came back, so last night, I went into his house and got his supply, too.”

“You broke into your neighbor’s home?” Cranston asked.

“Hell, no. Dale always kept a spare key under a lawn gnome he had sitting between his shrubs. I used the key. He always kept his Skoal in his refrigerator, so it’d stay fresh. He took his tobacco very seriously. I reckon he’d want it to go to a good home.”

Drew shook his head, as if ashamed by what he was hearing, but the grin on his face said something different. “Stealing dip from a man’s home. What’s the world coming to?”

“I just said I didn’t steal it, now didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but it ain’t like you asked Dale’s permission either.”

“True,” Clay agreed, “but I guarantee one thing.”

“What’s that?” Drew asked, tugging on the dog’s leash.

“I guarantee you I won’t run out for a while.”

“Let’s hope not. You’re like a bear with a sore ass when you have a nicotine fit.”

“Fuck you.”

I tensed, expecting their tempers to flare, but that didn’t happen. They bickered and teased as longtime friends do, but if the strange, emotional response we’d all been experiencing was affecting them, too, they didn’t show it.

Russ and I walked behind them. Cranston dropped back to join Ms. Stevens (who told us to call her by her first name, Olivia), Clewon, and Anna, all of whom walked close behind us. Clewon was in bad shape—panting for breath and continually asking if we could stop and rest. Given what he did for a living, I got the feeling that most of his exercise was limited to lifting coffee cups and typing. T, Irish, Stan the Man, Mad Mike, and Mario brought up the rear. The occasion was solemn enough that Mario had put away his video game.

Cranston began quietly humming an off-key tune. After a minute, I recognized it as something by John Prine. I wasn’t sure what the name of the song was, but I remembered it as something my mother had used to listen to. It made me sad. All the sudden, I missed her terribly. Then my thoughts turned to my grandfather—and what I’d seen in the darkness; something pretending to be his ghost. It made me want to scream. Cranston

must have subconsciously picked up on my mood because he stopped humming. Maybe he just decided that nobody else was in the mood, since none of them joined in.

The three dogs kept their noses to the ground, ignoring everything but the subtle commands of their masters. Occasionally they strained at their leashes, trying to follow lines of scent, but Drew and Clay always pulled them back. The dogs didn't seem particularly bothered by the darkness, but as we neared the edge of town, I noticed that their speed decreased and they no longer wanted to stray. They stuck close to their masters instead. Their tails no longer wagged. Their ears drooped.

Russ leaned close to me and whispered, "You know we're being followed, right?"

I turned around but didn't see anyone in the shadows.

"By who? Where?"

"That homeless guy—Dez. He's been sneaking along behind us ever since we left."

Olivia, Cranston, and Anna overheard us, and they all turned around, too. T and his boys did the same.

"Go on," Anna shouted, stomping her foot. "Get out of here, you psycho. Git!"

"He's not a stray dog," Olivia said.

"No, he's not. I'd take pity on a stray dog. That guy is just plain wrong."

I frowned. "He's mentally ill, but I always thought he was pretty harmless."

Anna snorted. "Harmless? Ask Kathy Crawford what he did to her cat three years ago."

"What did he do?"

"Killed it. And I ain't talking he accidentally ran it over with a car or anything like that. He snatched it out of their backyard. Her daughter saw him do it from the kitchen window. Later they found the cat out in the woods. The poor thing was all burned up and there was a little ring of stones around it, and candles and other weird shit. He's a goddamned devil worshipper, plain and simple. Ought to be locked up. None of us are safe long as he's around."

“That’s some fucked-up shit,” T said. “Motherfucker be burning cats and shit.”

I had to admit, T was right. It *was* some fucked up shit, if it was true. Hurting animals was how serial killers usually started out. I peered into the blackness but still didn’t see anything.

“You sure he’s back there?” I asked Russ. “I don’t see him, and the dogs don’t seem to be reacting.”

“He was. Maybe he snuck off now. Anna might have scared him away.”

“Dogs wouldn’t pay him no mind, anyway,” Drew explained. “Unless he was a rabbit or a fox or something.”

“Do we have any kind of protection?” Olivia whispered.

“Robbie and I both have handguns,” Russ said.

“So do me and Clay,” Drew admitted.

Anna bent over, pulled up her pant leg, and produced a hunting knife with a thick, eight-inch-long locking blade. “I’ve got this. He comes around again, I’ll gut him like a fish. See if I don’t.”

We reached the mall and crossed the parking lot. The dogs grew increasingly hesitant, and Drew and Clay had to prod them along more and more. The pavement was dirty and pitted, and scraggly brown weeds grew through the cracks. Broken bottles glittered in our flashlight beams. Trash crunched and rustled beneath our feet—aluminum cans, fast-food wrappers, cigarette butts, and a soiled baby diaper. There were a few cars in the parking lot, but it was mostly empty. I wondered where the vehicles’ owners were.

Clevon reached into his pocket and pulled out a candy bar. He slowly unwrapped it, dropped the wrapper on the ground, and then took a bite. There was an almost worshipful expression on his face as he chewed.

“Where did you get that?” Olivia asked.

“The grocery store. I got boxes of them.”

“Can I have one?”

He quickly shoved the rest of the candy bar in his mouth. His lips were ringed with chocolate and crumbs.

“Don’t have any more with me. Sorry about that.”

Olivia glared at him but said nothing.

A few yards behind the strip mall, we stepped onto an adjacent vacant lot. It was overgrown with weeds and brambles, and cluttered with more trash. Halfway across the vacant lot, the barrier became apparent again. The blackness turned into something more than just darkness. Russ and I had seen it before, but the others stared at it with a mix of awe and trepidation. They also stared at the runes and symbols etched into the dirt. It looked like Dez had used a shovel or a garden trowel to make them because they were dug deep—eight or nine inches into the ground, at least, and wide enough so that if the soil collapsed in on them, they wouldn't be obliterated.

“What are those?” Olivia asked, pointing.

“Some *Evil Dead* shit,” T said. “Motherfucking Bruce Campbell-style shit. Know what I'm saying?”

Irish screwed up his expression, and the freckles stood out on his cheeks and forehead. “Man, you always be trippin' over those old movies.”

“That's because they good, yo. You ain't got no love for the classics. You down with all those weak-ass remakes Hollywood be churning out.”

“Can one of you translate for me?” Anna asked.

“What?” Russ smirked. “The symbols on the ground or what these guys are saying to each other?”

Clevon, Drew, and Clay all snickered at the joke. Olivia rolled her eyes.

“The symbols are runes of some kind,” I explained.

Anna scowled. “Like the occult?”

“Not necessarily. Lots of different religions use symbols like this—Wiccans, Pagans, the Vikings, Drui—”

“Like I said, the occult. Witches. I overheard you and Dez. I know what's going on here, Robbie.”

“Excuse me?”

“‘Thou shall have no other gods before me, and thou shall not suffer a witch to live.’ God's word.”

“And that will be enough of that,” Cranston groaned. “Jesus Christ, man, for all we know, we might be the last people left alive on Earth, and one of them has to be a narrow-minded, Bible-thumping extremist. That's the kind of thinking that screwed this planet up the first time around. You don't need Jesus to practice peace and love.”

“I’m no extremist.” Anna stomped toward him. “What, you think just because I recognize Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, that I’m crazy? Extremists blow up abortion clinics or fly their airplanes into buildings. They kill innocents. I don’t. There’s no need to. God deals with everyone eventually.”

She jabbed a finger into Cranston’s chest, but he refused to back down.

“Well, I can’t speak for everyone else, but I don’t appreciate the sermon. You could be a little more tolerant and respectful of other people’s beliefs.”

“Screw you, hippy.”

Cranston laughed. “See? That’s what I mean. I bet you don’t talk like that on Sunday.”

Anna’s hands curled into fists. Russ and I stepped in before the situation spiraled out of control. I didn’t know Anna, but I knew Cranston well enough to realize that this wasn’t normal behavior for him. I glanced at the darkness, then back to him. The blackness seemed to shine in his eyes. Then Cranston moved his head and I realized that it was just an illusion—a trick of the light.

Except there was no light.

“Come on, guys,” I urged. “Let’s focus on what we came here for. This isn’t helping anybody.”

“I’m sorry, Robbie,” Cranston said. “You’re right. But she started it.”

“And I’ll damn well finish it, too.”

“Enough,” Russ shouted, pulling Anna away from Cranston. “Knock it the hell off, both of you!”

“Get your paws off me!”

Before Russ could react, Anna hauled back and slapped him openhanded across the face. It was loud—like the crack of a bat hitting a baseball. The dogs howled at the commotion, straining at their leashes and jumping into the air. Drew and Clay cursed, trying to control them. Russ’s flashlight tumbled from his hand and rolled across the ground. For a moment, Anna’s handprint stood out stark white against his cheek. Then it turned red. Russ stood there, hands at his sides, mouth open. He didn’t speak. He didn’t have to. The look in his eyes said it all.

“I warned you,” Anna said. “Nobody touches me like—”

Russ punched her square in the mouth. He moved so quickly that at first, I didn't realize what had happened. One moment he was standing there. The next, he was swinging. He threw all his weight into the blow, his entire body moving in tandem with his fist. Teeth and blood flew through the air. Shrieking, Anna stumbled backward. Her hands fluttered to her ruined lips. Blood spurted from between her fingers. Russ examined his still-clenched fist. A broken shard from one of her teeth jutted from his knuckle. Wincing, he pulled it out and stepped toward her. Blood welled up in the wound and dribbled across his fingers.

"Damn," Stan the Man murmured. "Homeboy just smacked that old bitch right in the mouth."

"Word," Mad Mike added. "That's some cold-ass shit right there."

The rest of T's group nodded in agreement. I resisted the urge to shoot the teens. Apparently, Drew felt the urge, too, because he pulled his pistol out of his waistband. It had been hidden beneath his flannel shirt. But instead of pointing it at T's crew, he aimed it with one hand, alternating between Russ and Anna. The barrel bobbed up and down in tandem with his shaking hands. Drew's eyes were narrowed. His lips were pressed together in a tight grimace. Clay stared at us, wide-eyed, trying to control the black-and-tan, whose howls had turned to growls. Drew's aim returned to Russ. He seemed to have forgotten all about the dogs. He held the beagles' leashes in one hand, and the dogs strained the leads to their limit.

"Hey!" I yanked out my own handgun and pointed it at Drew. "What the hell are you doing? Put that away, man. The fuck is wrong with you?"

With one hand clutching her face, Anna grabbed her knife. The blade shone in Olivia's flashlight beam.

"Ya'll get ready to jet," T muttered to his friends. "Shit's about to go down hard."

"That's not going to help you," Russ told Anna, nodding at her knife.

He reached behind him and produced his gun. Anna whimpered, and her eyes widened. Russ grinned.

"Jesus," Clevon gasped. "Oh, Jesus Christ..."

"Shoot her, man," Cranston moaned. "We don't need her kind around here. Especially not now. She's part of the problem."

"Nobody is shooting anybody," I yelled. "Let's all calm the hell down. Right fucking now."

“Stop it, please,” Olivia cried. “What are you doing?”

“Shit is whack,” T observed.

I ignored them both. “Put it away, Drew. Come on, dude. There’s no need for this.”

Drew’s aim turned to me. “Put yours away first.”

“Like hell I will.”

“Your choice, Robbie.” His aim didn’t waver. His hands no longer shook. The barrel of his gun looked very large and round, and it was full of darkness.

“Stop it,” Olivia screamed again. “What is wrong with you people?”

“YO!”

We all turned. T stared at us with an expression of bewildered amusement. He shook his head and smiled.

“Every one of you motherfuckers are tripping. Ain’t none of you remember what we said before? It’s that stuff out there—the motherfucking dark. It’s fucking with your heads, ya’ll. Know what I’m saying? It wants us to do this shit. It wants us to kill each other. Shit ain’t right.”

“Word,” Mario agreed. “Shit is fucking seriously whacked.”

We all stared at them in stunned silence. Then Clay said, “Do any of you boys speak English?”

“We are speaking English, dog,” T said. “You just ain’t listening. Now let’s get this shit over with. The darkness is fucking with us. I say we fuck it right back.”

“He’s right,” I said, and lowered my gun. After a moment, Drew did the same. Russ hesitated, eyeing Anna suspiciously. Then he put his pistol away as well and retrieved his flashlight.

“Sorry,” he muttered, but it was unclear who he was apologizing to.

Clutching his stomach, Clevon turned away and vomited his candy bar into the weeds. Everyone stepped away from him. Mad Mike wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Anna?” I stepped toward her, my hands outstretched to show that they were empty. “Put the knife away.”

She glared at me with tears in her eyes. Blood streamed down her forearms. It looked strange in the dim light. Suddenly, Anna turned and fled back toward the strip mall.

“You’ll all be sorry,” she shrieked. “Mark my words. You’ll be sorry!”

Olivia called after her to come back, but Cranston told the teacher to let her go.

"It's better anyway," Clay said. "Before we were unlucky thirteen. Now we're an even dozen."

"Not if you count them dogs," Irish pointed out.

Clay shrugged. "They're just dogs...*dog*. Did I say that right?"

T's friends laughed as if this was the funniest thing in the world.

"You learning," Irish said. "There might be hope for you yet, *dog*."

Clay grinned, then spat another stream of tobacco juice. The dogs continued baying.

"Can't you shut them up?" Russ asked. "They're making my head hurt."

"I thought they were just worked up over your fight," Drew explained, "but something else must have them spooked. Their bark is different, too. Don't sound like they do when they're tracking a rabbit."

"They sound scared," Clay said.

"It's that." I pointed into the darkness. "They sense the same thing we do."

"Maybe they're smarter than we are," Clevon whispered. "After all, they don't seem inclined to get any closer to it."

"If you want to go," I told him, "then go now. That goes for the rest of you. If anybody else wants to leave, do it now. I won't think any less of you. But you all see what's happening. It's just going to get worse. If we don't do something soon, it might be too late."

"I'm staying," Drew said. "But I've got to be honest. I'm still not sure this will help us get a handle on our situation."

"Maybe not," I admitted, "but it's a start. It's something."

We strode to the edge of the barrier and gathered around the symbol in the dirt. The dogs refused to go any farther. Drew and Clay had to grip the leashes tightly to keep them from running away. The dogs strained against them and whined.

While we were still huddled together, I asked once more if everyone was sure they wanted to go through with it. Figured I'd give them one last chance. They all nodded, signaling that they wanted to stay. A few seemed more scared now that we were actually at the dark's edge, but they didn't back down. We pulled out the ropes and tied a length around each of our

waists, making sure the knots were tight. I hadn't accounted for various waistlines and stuff, but we kept about two feet of slack between each of us.

"We can go twenty-four feet max," I said.

"That ain't far," Stan the Man said.

"It's far enough. If something is going to happen to us in there, I imagine it will happen right away. Me and Russ and my girlfriend watched some firemen drive into it out on 711, and they started screaming right away. So if we make it the full twenty-four feet, we'll know we can go farther next time. Maybe try it with a vehicle or something."

Stan the Man shrugged. "Sounds stupid to me."

I sighed, trying to control my temper. "Then why are you doing it?"

"Because T said we got to. Why you doing it?"

"Because I want to help. I want to do something—anything."

"But why?"

I paused before answering him. "Because nobody else is. Somebody has to."

"So let's do it already, man," Cranston said, "before we talk ourselves out of it."

"Okay." I took a deep breath and exhaled. "Who's going first?"

Before they could answer, a twig snapped. We all spun around and shined our flashlights back at the strip mall. I figured it was Anna returning—maybe to apologize or looking for more trouble—but Dez stepped into the beams, shielding his eyes with one hand.

"Hey," he called. "Listen for a second. You can't go any farther! You really can't."

"Look who's back," Clevon said, rolling his eyes "What's he want now?"

"Oh for fuck's sake," Russ muttered. "We don't have time for this shit."

"Be nice," Olivia said. "He can't help the way he is. If anything, we should be watching after him."

"Screw that," Clay said. "We got enough problems."

"Go on home," I told Dez, speaking calmly and slowly, as if he were a little kid. "We're okay. Don't worry about us. We're not going to go far. We just want to try an experiment."

"Experiments are bad."

“No, they’re not,” I reasoned. “Look at all the good things in life that have been the result of an experiment.”

Dez shook his head. “The Black Lodge men tried all kinds of experiments and look what happened. There was a Philadelphia experiment. The Havenbrook experiment. Mount Saint Helens and Mount Shasta were both experiments. South America. That incident in the Pacific during World War Two.”

We glanced at one another in confusion and shrugged.

“Although,” Dez continued, “some of those didn’t happen on our world, so maybe they didn’t happen at all. It’s hard to say sometimes. If something happens on another Earth but didn’t happen here, then did it really happen? If another you dies but you’re still alive, then what does that mean? It makes my head feel funny if I think about it for too long.”

“Anybody know what he’s talking about?” Cranston asked. “Because I’m lost, man.”

“I do,” Clevon said. “At least part of it—Black Lodge. It’s a conspiracy-theory thing. There’s all kinds of stuff about them on the web. They’re supposedly some kind of black-ops division. An international paramilitary group that deals with the paranormal. At first they were American. Then they fell under the auspices of the United Nations. And then, finally, they supposedly branched off on their own.”

“Yeah,” Russ agreed. “I’ve read about that, too. The same people who believe in them also believe that the royal family are lizard people and that the New World Order controls everything and that FEMA has death camps scattered across the United States and that 9/11 was an inside job.”

“9/11 *was* an inside job,” Drew said. “Our government did it. First step toward turning us into a communist state.”

“Do you really believe that?” Olivia asked.

Drew nodded. “Watch the footage. Ain’t no way those planes did all that damage. And it was a missile that hit the Pentagon.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Russ said, sighing. “People believe in this stuff because they need a reason to be scared. They need something to focus their fears on. There’s no such thing as the NWO or Black Lodge. It’s all bull crap.”

Mario elbowed Stan the Man and whispered, “You hear this crazy shit?”

“Motherfuckers be tripping,” Stan the Man agreed.

“Listen,” Dez said, interrupting them all. “You can hear the darkness breathing.”

I shivered. Suddenly I was overwhelmed with a desire to flee—convinced that my idea would never work.

“He’s confused,” Olivia whispered. “This situation can’t have been easy on him.”

“Confused, my ass,” T said. “Motherfucker be—”

“Tripping,” Clay finished, eliciting another round of laughter from the homeboys.

Dez shuffled closer. His movements were timid, and he looked like he was ready to cry again. He glanced down at the runes and then back up at me.

“Hush,” Olivia whispered. “You guys are hurting his feelings. Have some compassion.”

I started to walk toward him but forgot about the ropes until I felt them tug at my waist. I held out my hand instead.

“Look,” I said, keeping my voice calm, “this is important. We *have* to try this. I know you’re scared of the darkness. So are we.”

“Yes,” Dez agreed, “but I’m scared of it for a different reason than you are. Like everyone else, you’ve been scared of the darkness since you were a baby. But you don’t know why. Not really. I do. I’m scared of the dark because I know what it is. That’s why I wrote the words. I used up twelve whole cans of salt, too. It doesn’t like salt.”

He pointed at the symbol in the dirt.

“You made those?” Russ grunted. “Did you spray paint the ones out on the highway, too?”

I started to speak but then remembered that Russ hadn’t overheard Dez tell me that earlier. He’d been farther ahead with the rest of the group.

Dez nodded. “And behind the gas station and up on the hill above the high school. Four of them. That kept it out. Then I put little ones between them, at different places. I used a lot of salt.”

“You didn’t happen to take all the shaving cream, too, did you?” Cranston asked.

Dez frowned. “No. That’s just silly.”

“So,” Cleveon said, “why did you do this again?”

“Because,” Dez answered impatiently, “when the lines connect, they form a barrier. It keeps the dark out.”

“It keeps the dark out,” I repeated. “But does it keep us in? Can we go out?”

“Sure. But you’ll die if you do.”

“Why? What’s out there, Dez? Do you know?”

“The dark.”

“Yes, but I mean *in* the dark. What’s in it?”

“There’s nothing in it. It’s just the darkness. That’s enough. That’s always been enough. The things we fear spring from the darkness. It gives birth to them. It knows what we’re afraid of and what we want most in life, and it makes us see those things. It is the oldest and most powerful of the Thirteen. It is He Who Shall Not Be Named.”

“Listen,” Russ said. “Either start making sense or shut the hell up.”

“There’s no need to speak to him like that,” Olivia protested. “Can’t you see he needs our help?”

Ignoring her, Russ continued. “If you want to help us, Dez, then you can hold the end of the rope and pull us back out if something happens. How’s that sound?”

Dez glanced down at the rope around our waists, then out into the black void, and then at each of us. He seemed to be studying our faces. He shuffled closer, knelt, and patted the dogs. All three of them seemed to like him. They whined softly and licked his face. Their tails, though still cowed, wagged.

“Okay,” Dez agreed. “I will help.”

And then we were unlucky thirteen again.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Drew and Clay should go first,” Cranston pointed out. “After all, they’ve got the dogs, and we said we wanted the dogs to lead us, right?”

“The dogs won’t enter,” Dez said. “The dark has already tried showing them its visions. It wants them to come in, just like us. But they’re too afraid.”

“Bullshit.” Clay spat tobacco juice and scratched his black-and-tan behind the ears. “Steakhouse ain’t never run from anything in his life.”

Olivia frowned. “You named your dog Steakhouse?”

“Sure did. It’s his favorite thing in the world. Mine too. Ain’t been to a steak-house yet that I wouldn’t eat at.”

“He’ll run away,” Dez said. “You’ll see.”

Ignoring him, I turned to Drew and Clay. “You guys okay with this? If not, we need to know now.”

“I’m fine with it,” Drew said. “I’ve never been afraid of the dark, not even as a little kid. I don’t see any reason to start now. Right, Clay?”

Swallowing hard, Clay nodded.

“I’ll take one of the walkie-talkies with me,” Drew said. “We’ll give the other one to whoever’s on the end.”

“What order are the rest of us going in?” I asked the group.

“How about the order we’re already tied in,” Olivia suggested. “That would be a lot easier than untying everyone again and rearranging ourselves.”

“True that,” Mad Mike said.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I wasn’t thinking. Just nervous, I guess.”

“I think we all are,” Russ said. “The sooner we get it over with, the sooner we can go home.”

Drew handed the other walkie-talkie to Cranston. They turned both units on and made sure they were working.

“Testing, testing, one, two, three.” Cranston grinned, then continued. “Breaker one-nine...”

“Stop it,” Russ told him. “You’ll run the battery down.”

“Dez,” I said, “you stay on the end and pull us out if we need you to.” He nodded but didn’t respond. His eyes seemed sad and frightened.

“You better recognize,” T told him. “Don’t leave our asses hanging out there, yo. Know what I’m saying?”

Dez nodded again and stared at the ground. “I think so.”

“Well, that makes one of us,” Russ said.

With that, we turned toward the darkness. Drew and Clay prodded the dogs forward. Clay held Steakhouse’s lead, and Drew held the leashes of the two beagles. Tails between their legs, the dogs lowered their noses to the ground and skulked toward the blackness. They made it past Dez’s symbol and sniffed. Steakhouse snorted as if he’d inhaled pepper. Then, as one, they locked their haunches, lowered their heads, and whined. One of the beagles cast a mournful glance back at Drew.

“Go on,” he urged. “Get up after that rabbit. Mind me, now! Go.”

The cringing dogs refused to budge. Drew prodded them with the toe of his boot, but still they held fast. He took a step toward them and jerked on the leash. Steakhouse growled, low and vicious.

“Steakhouse,” Clay exclaimed. “What the hell’s got into you, boy?”

The black-and-tan growled again, baring his teeth this time. Then he snapped at Drew’s foot. The big man jerked his leg away just in time.

“Goddamn it,” he cursed. “That’ll be enough of that.”

“He ain’t never acted like that before,” Clay said. “Sorry, Drew.”

“I told you they wouldn’t go,” Dez said.

Cranston sighed. “I think maybe our new friend is right, man. What now?”

“Maybe we should listen to the dogs,” Olivia said, doubt creeping into her voice. “Obviously they know something we don’t.”

“They’re gonna know my boot up their ass if they don’t listen,” Drew said. Despite his bluster, I noticed that he was keeping clear of Steakhouse. The dog’s reaction had clearly rattled him.

“Shit,” T said, puffing out his chest. “I’ll go first.”

“You can’t, yo,” Irish reminded him. “You in the middle of the chain.”

“Shut your dumb ass up. I know that. I was just saying, is all.”

“Fucking mutts.” Drew whistled, motioning to Dez. “Here. Take these leashes and hold on to them. Don’t let go, or they’re liable to run off.”

“How can he pull us out if he’s holding on to the dogs?” Russ reminded him. “How about we just untie Olivia and let her hold them?”

“Oh, please,” Olivia groaned. “Now is not the time for chivalry. Although I appreciate the gesture, this is my town, too. If this will help, then I want to be a part of it.”

I had to give her credit. The schoolteacher had balls. Russ had offered her an out—an out that I’m sure all of us, despite our protestations of bravery, would have been happy to fucking take at this point. But she’d turned it down.

My thoughts went to Christy, and once again I wished she were there with us.

Russ pointed to the edge of the vacant lot. “Wrap their leashes around that light pole, Dez. Then get your ass back here.”

Nodding, Dez collected the dogs and led them away. They trotted along behind him, eager to get away from the darkness. After he’d tied them up, they lay down, panting, and stared at us. Dez returned.

“You still won’t listen.”

“No,” Russ said, “we’ve listened. Now we need to find out for ourselves.”

Clevon held up his hand. “I’d be willing to listen a little longer.”

Everyone ignored him.

Drew took a deep breath and crossed into the darkness. It enveloped him almost immediately, and he vanished from sight. Clay followed close behind him, if somewhat reluctantly.

“Oh, damn...” Irish balked.

“Move, yo.” Stan the Man pushed him forward. “Those old dudes gonna get hung up if you don’t.”

Irish followed after Clay. Stan the Man stayed right behind him. He stretched out his arm and put his hand on Irish’s shoulder. Then they disappeared, too. The darkness seemed to flow over them like water.

We could hear them breathing through Cranston’s walkie-talkie. They sounded like they were having asthma attacks. Their breathing was harsh and ragged and loud, and reminded me a little bit of Darth Vader. Clay mumbled something unintelligible. Then Drew muttered that it was cold.

Mad Mike and Olivia were next in line, but before they could pass the symbol, Drew and Clay began screaming. Cranston’s walkie-talkie emitted

a blast of static and then went dead, but we didn't need it to hear their cries.

"Oh, shit," Cranston gasped. He dropped the dead radio and tugged at the rope around his waist. "Run!"

"Wait," I shouted. "We don't know what's happening."

The shrieks increased in intensity, as Irish and Stan the Man joined in. Again, I noticed the weird dampening effect that the blackness seemed to have on sound. The four of them couldn't have been more than a few feet beyond the barrier, but it sounded as if they were much farther away. Irish was crying for his parents. Drew screamed at someone named Hank and told him to get off the ice before it broke. Clay's cries were unintelligible. Stan the Man shouted at someone to get it off of him. I didn't know what the "it" he referred to was—the darkness or something else inside it.

Olivia tried to back away and Mad Mike tried to simultaneously plod forward. The rope stretched taut between them. Behind me, Russ and T pulled on the rope, jerking me backward a few steps. Mario, forgetting that he was tethered to the rest of us, turned to flee and ran into Cranston. Both of them tumbled to the ground. I heard the air whoosh from Cranston's lungs. Clevon just stood there, gaping.

"Stan," Mad Mike hollered. "Irish!"

"Pull them out," Russ shouted. "For God's sake, pull them the hell out!"

He and T gripped the rope and yanked hard. They spaced their feet apart and locked their knees, angling for leverage. After a moment's hesitation, Clevon joined them. Then I did the same. In front of me, Olivia screamed at Mad Mike to follow her. If he heard the frightened woman, he gave no indication. He just stared, slack-jawed, arms hanging at his sides, as the darkness rippled in front of him like a wall of black water. I got the distinct impression that he was hypnotized or something. I wondered what the blackness was showing him—or who it was showing him.

T shouted at him, but Mad Mike still seemed oblivious. He took one step forward, then another, and his feet slipped past the symbol on the ground. Immediately, the darkness rushed forward. Although I couldn't see it, I had no doubt that the teenager was seeing a vision much like the ones we'd experienced. He reached out, and his hand sank into the black substance. It flowed over him like tar, engulfing his forearm, and then his entire arm.

“C-cold,” he stammered, turning toward us. His face was pale. “It feels so cold...”

The darkness raced over him, and Mad Mike didn’t even have time to scream. It slithered up his shoulders and neck, and rushed toward his gaping mouth. It poured into him, gushing into his mouth and ears and the corners of his eyes. Then, just like that, he was gone—absorbed by it.

Black tendrils shot out and grasped at Olivia, but she remained behind the runes, and they faltered at its edge. The bottom dropped out of my stomach, and suddenly it was very hard to breathe. Watching the tentacles reach for Olivia, there was no doubt in my mind now that the darkness was a solid, living thing. It clung to the length of rope between Olivia and the space where Mad Mike had been as if the rope were a bridge. In a way, I guess it was.

Olivia ran toward us. Despite the fact that I was fucking terrified beyond belief, I noted that she didn’t struggle. She moved quickly, as if there was no one left tied to the other end of the rope. Russ, T, Clevon, and I lunged forward, pulling the still-prone forms of Cranston and Mario with us. Sobbing, Olivia collapsed into Russ’s arms, almost knocking him over. The two of them teetered back and forth before Russ caught his balance. Clevon closed his eyes and sank to his knees, gasping for breath. T and I faced the darkness alone. This was the closest I’d stood to it yet. The air seemed colder. Not damp. Just frigid. T must have noticed it, too, because I saw that he was shivering. I put my hand on his chest and pointed at the ground.

“Whatever you do, don’t cross beyond that symbol. That’s the only thing keeping us alive right now.”

“Shoot it,” he said.

“What?”

“You said that you and your boy had guns, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, then shoot the motherfucker!”

“You can’t shoot darkness. That wouldn’t—”

I stopped in midsentence. It hadn’t occurred to me, but if the darkness was a living thing, then wasn’t it possible we could hurt it—maybe even kill it? If so, then why wouldn’t firearms work?

“Shoot it,” T urged again. “Cap that fucking thing.”

I fumbled for my pistol. Russ handed Olivia to T and pulled his handgun out as well. The two of us raised the weapons and fired into the darkness. The pistol jumped in my hands. Flashes of light erupted from our barrels, blinding us for a second. The shots were louder than I would have imagined. My ears rang from the sound, and my hands vibrated.

“That’s no good,” Dez shouted, running up from behind us. “Get back. Get behind me.”

My ears were ringing so bad that Dez had to repeat himself twice. Stunned, we did as we were told. Dez charged forward, standing squarely in the middle of his crude symbol. Both of his fists were clenched, and in the dim glow of Cranston’s flashlight (which had fallen to the ground and was pointed directly at us) I saw glittering grains of coarse salt falling from between his fingers.

*“Ia Ishtari, ios daneri, ut nemo descendre fhatagn Shtar!”*

He tossed both handfuls of salt at the looming shadows. The grains seemed to spark with a blue energy as they flew toward it. When they struck the darkness, it withdrew as if shocked. The black tendrils dissipated like smoke. Dez shoved his hands into his coat pockets and pulled out two more fistfuls of salt. He repeated the gibberish and flung them as well. The darkness fell back completely.

“Pull them out,” Russ yelled, stowing his gun again. “Get them out of there!”

Blinking, I nodded and stowed my gun as well. Then me, Russ, Clevon, T, and Olivia clutched the rope and pulled. It came easily because there was no weight on the other end. My stomach sank. I held my breath. T swore. Inch by inch, the rope snaked out of the darkness. Vapor rose from it, billowing in the beam of the flashlight. There were no cuts or frays. Indeed, the rope still looked brand new. The knots were still there from where we’d tied them around Drew, Clay, Irish, and Stan the Man’s waists—but the people were missing. There was no sign of them. No blood or skin. No scraps of clothing. Nothing. Not even a hair. It was as if they’d never existed.

“Yo,” T whimpered, sounding very much like a scared teenager and less like a street thug. “Where the hell are my friends? What the hell is going on?”

“They are part of it now,” Dez said. “Your friends are no more. They are darkness.”

“Fuck that noise. Irish! Stan! Holler back. I’m coming to get you. Just hang tight.”

He stumbled forward, but we grabbed him and held him back. He fought with us, struggling to get free and screaming for his missing friends, but the darkness didn’t answer.

“Let me go,” he cried. “Get the fuck off me.”

“They’re gone,” I whispered. “T, listen to me. They’re gone, man. Don’t kill yourself, too. It’s over.”

“The hell it is. If it’s over, then we might as well give the fuck up now. Know what I’m saying? How the hell are we supposed to fight *that*?”

None of us answered because none of us had an answer for him. In truth, I’d been wondering the same thing. Other than throwing a truckload of table salt at it, I hadn’t seen anything that hurt the darkness, and something told me there wasn’t enough salt in Walden to do the job anyway.

“It ate my friends,” T screamed. “That fucking shit ate my goddamn friends!”

I turned to Dez to ask if he had any ideas and to have him explain what he’d been hollering at the darkness before he threw the salt, but he was already gone. He’d slipped off into the shadows while we’d struggled with T.

“Where did he—”

*Robbie...*

It was my grandfather’s voice, but when I turned to look at him, instead of seeing his ghost, I found myself confronted by a creature straight out of a fairy tale. At the edge of the darkness stood a half-goat, half-man. I recognized it from the fantasy novels I used to read when I was a kid. It was a satyr. It had my grandfather’s voice and face, but that was where the similarities ended. Thick, curved horns jutted from its furry brow and a huge penis dangled between its legs. The obscene organ bobbed and swayed.

I blinked, and when I looked again, the goat-man had transformed into a giant snake. The creature writhed back and forth. Its coils and scales were black. As I watched, the darkness changed shape again, turning into a pillar

of fire, then a massive razor blade, then a needle, and then a wheelbarrow full of severed dog heads. I was horrified and disgusted. I felt like screaming, but I couldn't turn away. The process sped up, the transformations flickering by like camera flashes. A baby with a fishhook in its mouth. A mound of bloody feces. Children on wooden pikes. A massive worm, bloated and blind. A nun with forks in her eyes. Something that looked like a dolphin but screamed with a woman's voice. A moving corpse, pieces of it falling off as it stepped forward. A creature made of green mucus. A looming monster that looked like a cross between a gorilla and a cat. Kurt Cobain with half of his head missing. Hooded men, like the terrorists who beheaded people live on the news, holding large curved blades. A naked woman, vomiting tiny snakes from her mouth and nose and then her vagina. A quivering, gelatinous mass composed of what looked like raw flesh. A giant penis that spurted blood instead of semen. And finally a huge floating eyeball, dripping slime in its wake.

Around me, the others alternately gasped or screamed. Finally able to break the spell, I looked away from the horrifying images and turned to my friends. All were staring into the darkness. I wondered if they were seeing the same things I was. I glanced back at the darkness. I didn't want to, but I felt *pulled*. The visions had turned into my grandfather again. Then the figure became a swirling black tornado, which eventually morphed into Christy. She was naked and bleeding. Tears ran down her face as she reached for me.

*"Robbie? I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I love you so much. It hurts. Help me..."*

"Christy? Holy shit! Hang on, honey."

I stumbled toward her, but Russ pulled me back.

"It's not real," he shouted. "Robbie? Remember, it's not real. She's not there. None of these things are. It's testing us—showing us the things we're afraid of."

His voice seemed to calm the others. One by one, they slowly turned away. The voices in the darkness ceased. The visions vanished. The blackness became blackness again.

Olivia fell to her knees and sobbed. She grabbed fistfuls of dirt, lowered her face to the ground, and shook. Russ and Cranston tried to comfort her. Clewon stood staring at the darkness, his expression blank.

I put my hand on T's shoulder. "I'm sorry about your friends, man. I didn't—"

He shoved me away. "Get the fuck off me, bitch."

"T, I'm trying to—"

"I don't give a flying fuck what you trying to do. You'd best stay clear of me from now on, motherfucker. Know what I'm saying? You see me coming, you'd better cross the fucking street. You step to me again and you'll get your motherfucking cranium cracked. If you doubt me, then just go ahead and fucking try."

"T...it's not my fault."

"Step off, motherfucker." Mario got between us, holding T back. "Come on, T. This bitch ain't worth it."

"It's not my fault," I insisted. "I didn't—"

T lunged for me. I fumbled for my gun, but before I could pull it, Mario pulled him back.

"Let me go." T struggled with his friend. "He's got it coming!"

"Another time," Mario whispered. "Not now. He's got his boys here."

"Fuck him and his boys."

"Not now. We'll do this later, T. You know I'm right."

"I'm sorry," I apologized again, holding up my hands. "I'm so fucking sorry."

T spat at my feet. Then he and Mario stomped away. I turned to Russ, Cranston, Clevon, and Olivia. Russ stared into the darkness. Olivia hung her head. Clevon wept. Only Cranston met my eyes. His expression was hard to read, but whatever he was feeling at that moment, it wasn't pretty. You know the old saying, "If looks could kill"?

It was kind of like that.

I glanced around for Drew and Clay's dogs, but they were gone. Maybe Dez hadn't tied them tight, or maybe he'd untied them before he slipped away. Whatever the case, they'd run off. Clevon had been right when he said that they were smarter than us.

The dogs were still alive. Half our group wasn't.

Eventually we went home, drifting off one by one. Russ, Cranston, and I walked together, but we didn't speak the entire way back to the apartment building.

As we walked, I resolved not to try to help anyone anymore. I decided to stop trying to do the right thing, or trying to figure a way out of our situation. It was pointless—and besides, there was already enough blood on my hands.

The darkness weighed heavy on my conscience.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I got home, Christy didn't ask me about what had happened. I was grateful for that because I was afraid that if I tried to talk about it, I might start screaming or crying and not be able to stop. She didn't seem pissed at me anymore, but neither did she show the slightest inclination to know what had occurred. I might have gone to work or out to eat for as much interest as she showed. Actually, I think she would have showed more interest in even those mundane activities. Usually, when I got home from work, she'd ask me how my night had gone. There was none of that this time. I played along and pretended that nothing had happened. I felt sick to my stomach and my nerves were jittery, but I put up a good front. If she heard me puking, she didn't mention it. I did it out the bedroom window so as not to contaminate the dwindling fresh water supply in our toilet bowl.

Cranston had disappeared into his apartment without as much as a good-bye, and Russ had gone upstairs as soon as we got back. I didn't see or hear from either of them for the rest of the day. I wondered if they were pissed at me, too. I'd asked them on the way home, as we passed by the car wash (a trash can was burning in one of the empty bays, and it sounded like there were people having a party inside). Cranston just shrugged and grunted. Russ swore that he wasn't mad—said he was just tired, and it had been a long day. He insisted that what had happened wasn't my fault. I took him at his word and hoped for the best.

T and Mario were gone by the time we left the vacant lot behind the mall, but I'd looked over my shoulder the whole way home. My paranoia grew, urged on by the darkness, my sense of helplessness, and my burgeoning guilty conscience. I was okay with them blaming me for the death of their friends. I blamed me, too.

I got undressed, took a sponge bath with some bottled water, put on some fresh deodorant, and then sacked out on the bed. The sponge bath didn't do much. I still felt grimy and tired. Eventually I fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept or what I dreamed about, but when I opened my eyes, I didn't feel rested. If anything, I felt worse than ever.

Christy moved against me in the gloom, soft skin sliding against my own. It startled me at first. I thought it was one of those shadowy tentacles reaching for me—that somehow, they’d gotten past Dez’s magical wards and salt and had come to drag me off into the blackness. But then she put her finger against my lips and whispered my name. I realized that I could see. She’d lit two scented candles while I slept, and placed them on the dresser and the nightstand. A faint hint of vanilla wafted through the room. I relaxed, and she glided over me. Her breasts and hips were warm and soft against my skin. Her nipples stiffened, teasing my own. I started to speak, but she silenced me with a deep, lingering kiss. She shifted her weight, grasped me with one hand, and slid me inside of her. I was surprised at how wet she already was. How *needful*. We made love without talking—the first time we’d done so since the darkness arrived, and when it was over, she finally spoke.

“You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to. But I’ll listen if you do.”

I wanted to tell her. I couldn’t keep it to myself any longer. So I did. All of it. It just came pouring out of me like bile. And when I was done, Christy told me that she loved me.

That made things a little better.

We lay there for a while, cuddling and talking, and I found out what Christy had been up to while we were gone. Growing restless and tired of sitting around worrying about me, Christy had snuck into some of the other apartments on our block—ones whose owners probably wouldn’t be coming back. She’d used a crowbar to break the locks and then searched the buildings one by one, grabbing stuff we could use—first aid, vitamins and pills, clothing, toiletries, food and water. Some of the apartments had already been ransacked—their furnishings slashed and broken. Others appeared untouched. She found dead people in two different apartments, and dead animals in many more—pets that had been left behind when their owners went to work and never returned. She said that the dead animals had upset her more than the people had.

While rummaging through the medicine cabinet of a place just three doors down from our building, she’d been interrupted by a group of men who’d had the same idea. Christy heard them stomping up the stairs just before they entered the apartment, and she quickly clambered into the

shower and pulled the curtain shut. One of the looters commented on the fact that the door had already been forced open, but they only conducted a perfunctory search. She said that they sounded drunk. While they rummaged through the apartment, they'd talked among themselves, laughing about a woman they'd raped the night before. Apparently, they'd put lit cigarettes out all over her body, including in each eye. There was also a suggestion that they'd done something to her nipples and clit with a pair of wire cutters. At one point, Christy thought she might black out from sheer panic, but she kept her shit together and waited.

The men tore through each room, knocking things over and breaking lamps and drinking glasses and windows. One of them found a hidden stash of porno, and they had a good laugh over that. One of them entered the bathroom and rifled through the medicine cabinet and scooped water from the toilet bowl, but luckily, he didn't investigate any further. She said the worst part was his stench. The man smelled like milk that had been left outside for several summer days in a row. She remained in hiding, cowering in the shower until they were gone.

"Are you okay?" I asked, when she was done.

Christy nodded. "I am now. I was pretty shook up after they left. I waited a long time. I was sure they knew I was in there and that they were playing a trick on me. I thought I'd find them waiting in the living room. But, Robbie—the things they were bragging about. The things they did. We didn't have people like that here before, did we?"

"I don't know. Maybe they always had the urges and just never acted on them until now. In any case, I don't want you going outside anymore."

"Only if you promise me the same thing."

"Believe me, hon. After today, you don't have to worry about that. I will if we need something, but otherwise, I'm staying put."

And for the most part, that's exactly what we did.

Except for the pet store.

We talked about it again the next day, after we'd woken up and had a breakfast of dry cereal and granola bars. Despite my story, Christy still believed that we were dead. In fact, once she'd heard the details of what happened to our group of explorers, she thought it just gave more credence

to her theory. She started talking about all the new age books she'd read down where she worked.

"When people have near-death experiences, they see one of two things. Sometimes there's a bright light, and they want to go into it. All the books say that the light leads to Heaven. It's our guide. But other times, all the people see is darkness. A lot of people think that's the way to Hell. They say they can feel the darkness tugging at them, and sometimes they even see loved ones who've gone there before them. Me, you, and Russ saw our loved ones. So did other people. And you said yourself that the darkness was moving and pulling."

I didn't feel like arguing and I didn't want to talk about it anymore, so I just shrugged and nodded, admitting that it might be so.

"If only we could find the light," she said. "If we could find the light, it would guide us to Heaven."

I nodded, agreeing that would be nice, but inside I was still doubtful. Believing that we were dead and that this was the afterlife was all fine and dandy, but that meant you had to believe in God, too. Before all of this, I never gave Him much thought. If God existed, then He pretty much left me alone, so I returned the favor. Now, I wondered. If He existed, then why wasn't He riding in at the head of a National Guard convoy? What kind of loving God would leave us in a bullshit situation like this? It didn't make sense to me.

A few nights later, someone set fire to the Methodist, Lutheran, and Catholic churches. All three burned to their foundations. The arsonist or arsonists were never caught, because nobody cared enough to find them.

I realized that I didn't care either. It was enough trouble just finding a reason to get up every day and stare out into that same impenetrable blackness. If God existed, He'd have to take care of His own shit. I wasn't the man for the job anymore.

Then Christy decided that we had to go outside again, and that was how the whole pet store debacle started. Looking back, I think that was the beginning of the end. Or maybe not. Maybe the beginning of the end started behind that strip mall when we lost everybody. But even then, even after that, there was still hope. I didn't feel any myself. At the time, all I felt was

guilt over what had happened. But Russ and other people still had hope, and secretly I did too—buoyed by theirs.

After the pet store, all my hope fucking died. If the incident behind the strip mall stuck a knife into my hope, then what happened at the pet store shot it in the head six times and then raped its bleeding corpse.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It turned out that Christy's adventure while looting the apartments had upset her more than she'd first thought. It wasn't the fact that she'd almost been discovered by a bunch of drunken, misogynistic sadists in training, or what they'd have probably done to her if they'd found her hiding in the shower. No, it turned out that Christy was still thinking about all the dead pets she'd encountered.

Or at least, that was how it appeared.

We were lying in bed, trying to muster the energy to get up and at the same time, trying to come up with a reason to bother. I'm not sure what time it was. Early morning, I guess. It had been about a week since we'd gone outside. From what I'd heard from Russ, we weren't missing much. Things were getting steadily worse, and it was happening quick. Be it the darkness or just the hopelessness of our situation, people were snapping. Walden was breaking down. The center wasn't holding.

"I keep thinking about those dead animals," Christy said. "The ones in the apartments."

I shook some Pringles potato chips out of the can lying between us and nodded.

"It made me wonder," she continued, "how many more there are, you know? Lots of people have pets. And then there's the pet store."

"What pet store?"

"The one downtown, next to the place where we got our taxes done last year."

"I didn't know there was a pet store there."

"Yeah. I used to go there sometimes, during my lunch breaks or on my way home from work, and look at the puppies and the kitties."

I was silent for a moment, thinking about that. Christy and I had lived together for a long time, and I'd just sort of assumed that we knew everything about each other. To find out that she had a routine I'd known nothing about—even one as innocuous as stopping at the pet store—seemed weird.

“Hate to say it,” I said, “but I’d imagine that all the animals in the pet store are dead by now, too. Walking in there would be like walking into a biohazard area.”

“I don’t think so. It’s not like the animals in people’s apartments. I mean, think about it, Robbie. People left for work that morning, and they probably only left enough food and water to get their pets through the day because they assumed they’d be coming home that night. But at the pet store, they have automatic feeders and water bottles set up. From what I saw, the employees refilled them at night, so that they’d never run low. Brandon used to say that there was enough to last the animals a long time, but that they refilled it every night anyway, because of—”

“Who?”

She blinked. “What?”

“Brandon. You said that ‘Brandon used to say.’ Who’s Brandon?”

It was too dark in the room to see her expression, but judging from her tone of voice and the way she shifted on the mattress, I was sure that Christy was blushing. I felt a cold certainty building inside me and beneath it, an even colder anger. Brandon was probably some guy she’d been fucking on the side. That had to be it. How long had it been going on? She said that she stopped in there after work. How many times had she sucked him off, swallowed his fucking load, and then come home and kissed me with that same mouth, his sperm still on her lips?

I clenched the sheets in my fists and shook with rage. Then I realized that Christy was talking, and the spell passed. It had been the darkness, toying with me, pulling my emotions like the strings of a marionette. Christy wasn’t cheating on me. She’d never do something like that.

“—with you?”

I forced myself to relax. “What? Sorry.”

“I asked what the hell was wrong with you? I thought you were having a seizure of something.”

“I’m okay.”

“Well, are you listening to me or not?”

“I am, honey. Sorry. Just got distracted for a minute. Anyway, who is Brandon again?”

“He’s just a guy who works at the pet store. That’s all.”

I tried to keep my voice calm. “Oh, that’s cool.”

“Anyway, the darkness came overnight, right? So if they filled the feeders and the water bottles up the way they usually do, then some of the animals might still be alive.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “I guess the snakes would be, at least. They only eat every so often, right?”

“The snakes, yes. But the other animals, too. They could still be alive and trapped in there. I want to do something about it.”

I held up my hands. “Whoa. Christy, I thought we agreed that we weren’t going outside anymore. It’s dangerous out there. There’s no telling what downtown is like by now. We’re much better off just staying here and —”

“You went.” Her tone was sullen. Her expression less so. She tried not to let her feelings show. Tried to hide her sudden irritation and anger with me. Tried to keep a poker face.

But Christy had always sucked at poker, which was why I liked to play strip poker with her any chance we got.

“Christy...”

“Goddamn it, Robbie! Why was it okay for you to leave when you got a bug up your ass about helping out? Now I want to do it, and I’m not allowed? Fuck you.”

“Calm down,” I said, keeping my voice even. “I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s a double standard. But you don’t understand, baby. You didn’t see what’s happening out there.”

“No, but I can hear it. I lie here in bed and I can hear it down there, Robbie. And it’s not just happening at nighttime anymore either. People are starting to figure out that they don’t have to wait for the cover of darkness because it’s dark all the fucking time.”

“Exactly. And that’s why we should stay put. It’s safer in here.”

“I need to do this, Robbie. You don’t understand.”

“Try me then. Explain it to me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

She shook her head. “I just can’t. It’s something I have to do. If you loved me, you’d understand that. You’d support it.”

I sighed, exasperated. “I do love you, Christy. That’s why I’m not crazy about you going out there—especially for a bunch of animals that

might be dead already.”

“They’re not dead! I told you already. They—”

“I know.” I held up my hands again. “I heard you. They’ve got automatic feeders and water bottles. But what if they’ve run empty by now? And even if they haven’t, is it really worth the risk? I mean, even if the majority of them *are* still alive, what are you going to do with them once you’ve set them free? You sure as hell can’t bring them all back here to live. You just going to turn them loose into the streets? Things are bad enough without a wild dog pack running around out there.”

Pouting, she said nothing.

“Think about it,” I whispered as I stroked her hair. “You know I’m right.”

She still didn’t respond, and because I’m an idiot, I left it at that. I figured she knew I was right. Sure, she was pissed off, but she also saw the sense in what I was saying.

I was wrong.

It was the sound of the deadbolt clicking open and the little chain lock rattling against the door that woke me. I opened one eye, confused, not sure if I’d actually heard the noise or just dreamed about it. After lying there in the dark for a few seconds, I heard the door snick shut, followed by the soft pad of footsteps going down the stairs.

I sat up, instantly alert, and reached for Christy. I figured somebody had broken into our apartment and was leaving now. Maybe something had scared them off. Maybe they hadn’t expected us to be home. Christy’s side of the bed was empty. The sheets were still warm from where she’d been sleeping. The pillow still held her indentation.

“Shit.”

I slipped out of bed and put on a dirty pair of jeans and a ragged T-shirt. Then I grabbed my baseball bat.

“Christy?”

There was no answer. The only sound was my own heart, throbbing in my ears.

“Christy? Hon? Are you okay?”

Again, silence. I ran out of the bedroom and searched the apartment, but it was empty. Christy was gone. I searched again and again, frantic, scared, looking in places I knew she couldn't possibly be, like under the bed and behind the refrigerator (we'd gotten rid of all the perishables, but even so, the refrigerator still smelled funny). There was no sign of her. I shouted for her, and my voice bounced back to me off the walls. It didn't sound like me. I stubbed my toe on the coffee table, splitting the nail, and collapsed onto the floor. I wanted to cry but didn't. A sick mix of fear and despair welled up inside me. My lips felt swollen and my heart beat faster.

On my fourth search, I found the note she'd left me. It was stuck to the door with a little piece of masking tape. I grabbed a flashlight and read the letter. Christy said that I didn't understand, and this was something she had to do, just like my second trip out to the edge of town had been something that I had to do. She said she'd be back as soon as she could, and that I shouldn't worry, and that she loved me.

"That stupid fucking..."

I couldn't even finish the sentence. My fears and anger were gone now, eradicated by pure, blind panic. I set the baseball bat on the floor. Crumpling the note and tossing it aside, I ran out of the apartment and took the stairs two at a time. When I reached Russ's apartment, I pounded on the door and shouted his name until he answered.

"Robbie?" He yawned and blinked. "Jesus Christ. What's wrong? What's happened? What time is it?"

"Christy's gone. She left. She's out there, heading downtown. You've got to lend me that pistol, man."

"What?"

"Christy's gone, dude!"

Russ was wearing a tattered, dirty bathrobe. It hung open, revealing his stomach. He scratched at his belly button and stared at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"What do you mean she's gone? Did you guys have a fight?"

"Yes. No. Sort of. It's a long story, man, and I don't have time to waste. I've got to get after her before something happens. Can I please borrow the gun?"

Russ paused. He stared at me, then looked over my shoulder as if expecting Christy to show up behind me. Then he turned his eyes back to

mine again.

“Sure, Robbie. You can borrow it. Just give me a second, okay? Come on inside.”

I followed him into the apartment, and he shut the door behind me. Then he disappeared into his bedroom. I heard him rustling around for what seemed like ten minutes and was about to ask him what the hell was taking him so long, when he suddenly emerged carrying both pistols, as well as a rifle with a scope slung over his shoulder. He was dressed in jeans, muddy work boots, and a flannel shirt. He handed me the pistol without a word, then dropped some extra bullets into my hand.

“Thanks.” The pistol was already loaded. I nodded at the rifle as I pocketed the extra ammunition. “Where’d you get that?”

“Out there. Found it in the street.”

Russ didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t ask him to. I got the sense that he didn’t want to talk about it.

“I’m going with you,” he said.

“I appreciate the thought, but I can’t ask you to do that, man.”

“You’re not asking me. I’m telling you. So let’s go.” He glanced down at my feet. “You might want to put some socks and shoes on first, though.”

I looked down and saw that I was barefoot. I’d been so worried about Christy that I hadn’t even noticed. We left his apartment. Russ locked the door behind us. Then, while I got some shoes on, he went downstairs and got Cranston. I never found out what he said to Cranston that convinced him to come along, but I was glad for it. The two of them met me in the foyer. Cranston had Russ’s other pistol in his hand. Russ had unslung the rifle and was holding it in both hands, peeking out into the street. Cranston nodded at me. I nodded back.

“Thanks for doing this,” I told him.

“No problem, man. Let’s just hope it doesn’t end up like last time, right?”

“Right.”

“Coast is clear,” Russ said. “The street is empty. I don’t see Christy, though.”

“She’s heading downtown,” I told them. “To the pet store. You guys know where that is?”

Russ shrugged. “I don’t.”

“I do,” Cranston said. “I bought a Nile monitor lizard there. I named him Jerry, after Jerry Garcia.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Jerry Garcia—the Grateful Dead, man.”

I shrugged. “My grandparents used to listen to them.”

Russ grinned. “I didn’t know you had a pet lizard, Cranston.”

“I don’t anymore. He got loose about a year ago.”

“In the building?” Russ looked around as if the monitor might still be lurking around.

“No,” Cranston said. “In the park. I used to take him out there on summer afternoons. He liked the sun. One day he slipped his leash.”

“You had him on a leash?”

Cranston nodded. “Just like a dog.”

“Is the coast still clear?” I asked, interrupting.

Russ peeked his head out the door and checked. “Yeah.”

“Then let’s go. If we hurry, we can still catch her.”

After turning on our flashlights, we went out into the dark and hurried down the street, walking side by side. A lot had changed in just a few days. The sidewalks and streets were a mess, full of broken glass, trash, spent bullet casings, torn or soiled scraps of clothing, and other debris. Many of the vehicles parked alongside the curb had smashed windshields or slashed tires. A few of them were up on blocks—their tires and rims stolen. I wondered who would want to gank expensive rims given everything that was going on. I mean, it wasn’t like they’d be able to sell them somewhere. What were they going to do? Put them on their car and drive down to Virginia Beach for the weekend?

We found the first dead body at the intersection. It was impossible to tell if it had been a man or a woman because the corpse was mauled beyond all recognition. It didn’t look like a human being. It looked like a pile of rancid meat, all sticky and spoiled and covered with ants and buzzing flies. There was no face, no scalp, no ears. It had been dismembered and eviscerated. The guts were strewn around. They glistened in the flashlight beams. Most of the blood had turned a rusty brown color. Cranston turned away and made a retching sound, but he didn’t puke. Russ didn’t react, but neither did he look at the body. I stared, transfixed, watching the ants swarm over the corpse. I wondered what the ants thought of the darkness.

Were they even aware of it? Did they know that things had changed? Did the darkness show them visions, too?

The farther we went, the more dead bodies we saw. Some were fresh. Others looked like they'd been there for a few days. The streets weren't overflowing with them or anything, but they were definitely around. Lying on the sidewalks and in the street or in open doorways. A few were inside cars, hunched over behind the steering wheels. Some were suicides. Others were obviously murders. It was easy to tell the difference. Suicides didn't usually dismember, disembowel, or behead themselves. They didn't maul or mangle their own sexual organs before dying. They didn't set themselves on fire. Well, okay, I know there was that monk during Vietnam that set himself on fire as a means of protest. I remember my grandpa telling me about that once. He showed me a picture from *Life* magazine. But the burned bodies we saw while looking for Christy? They didn't look like they'd been protesting shit.

In addition to the insects, there were a lot of birds— crows, pigeons, robins, woodpeckers, and all kinds of other songbirds. They perched on the bodies, fighting over and feasting on the soft, squishy parts of the dead, and on the bugs inside. When we'd get too close, the birds took flight, screeching and squawking as they retreated to rooftops and lampposts and trees. Again, I found myself wondering how the darkness impacted the nonhuman creatures in Walden. If the birds flew too high, did the darkness eat them, the way it had us? Did it try to entice them to fly higher? Show them visions of a big, juicy worm or their mommy bird who'd been eaten by a cat three years earlier?

One corpse, its abdomen swollen with gases, burst with a wet farting sound as we walked around it. That nearly sent all three of us screaming, but we held in there, determined to find Christy.

We saw a few buildings that had burned down. I wondered who had put the fires out. The remains of Chief Peters's fire department or just neighbors and concerned citizens? What would happen when we ran out of water to fight the fires? I assumed the flames would just jump from dwelling to dwelling, incinerating everything in its path. Conceivably, Walden could burn to the fucking ground, and we'd all be trapped between fire and darkness. If it came down to that, I'd probably choose burning to

death. Something told me that would be preferable to surrendering to those black tentacles.

The streets were full of more than just debris and the dead. There were living people, too. Some, like us, looked like they had a purpose. You could tell by the way they walked and their furtive, cautious glances. They had a reason to be outside. Others sauntered or lounged, giving off the impression that they either had no place to go—or were up to no good. But everyone that we saw had one thing in common. They were all armed. They carried shotguns and rifles, pistols and butcher knives, axes and shovels, baseball bats and golf clubs. One old man clutched a brown leather bullwhip in his gnarled, liver-spotted hands. He looked like a geriatric Indiana Jones. His clothing was muddy and torn, and a cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth.

“You guys got cigarettes to trade?” he asked.

“Sorry,” I replied. “We don’t. We’re just looking for someone. A girl.”

“I don’t trade in those, but there’s plenty of folks around who are starting to.”

I explained that we weren’t looking for that and described Christy. It turned out that the old man had seen her pass by ten minutes before us. We thanked him and hurried on our way.

The closer we got to downtown Walden, the more people we saw. Nobody fucked with us. I thought a few times that they would. We got dirty looks and heard some snickering behind our backs. A group of Mexican guys said something to us in Spanish, but none of us knew what it was. We ignored them and moved past. One of them whispered something, and the others laughed. Russ paused, but I urged him on without a word. At the intersection of Main and Broadway, somebody tossed an empty beer can at us. It hit the ground behind Cranston’s feet and rolled away. He humped, and Russ and I spun around, weapons at the ready, but we couldn’t tell who threw it or what direction it had come from.

We didn’t see any cars—at least, none that was moving. Everybody we spotted was on foot. A few rode bikes. But nobody drove. Maybe they were all trying to save gasoline, or maybe it was just because there was really no fucking place to drive to.

The weirdest thing was the silence. Despite the people and the birds, the streets were quiet. It felt to me almost as if the town was holding its

breath.

We found Christy sitting on the curb at Fourth and Sycamore. She had one of her shoes off and she was shaking a stone out of it. A kitchen knife lay on the pavement by her side. I recognized it as one of ours. She must not have realized it was us when she first saw us coming, because she leapt to her feet and started to run. Maybe the shadows hid our features or something. She stopped when I called her name and stood there shaking.

“Robbie?”

“What the hell are you doing out here? Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“You got my note?”

“Yeah, I got your note.” I grabbed her wrist. “We’ll talk about it later. Come on. We’re going home.”

Christy pulled away from me and yanked her arm free.

“No. I’m not going anywhere, Robbie. I told you, this is something I have to do. Can’t you understand that?”

Somebody made a wolf-whistle sound from one of the nearby buildings. Russ and Cranston glanced around. I reached for Christy again, but she backed up. Then, balancing on one foot, she put her shoe back on. Then she picked up the knife.

“I’m not going,” she repeated. “And if you can’t accept that, then just turn around now.”

Sighing, I clenched my teeth and turned around in a circle. I wanted to shout at her. To scream. To raise the pistol and fire a shot into the air, just to release my frustrations. But I did none of these things. Instead, I faced her again and said, “Okay.”

Christy frowned. “Okay, what?”

“Okay. I won’t try to stop you. But I’m not turning around either. I’m going with you.”

She blinked. No smile. No protest. She didn’t thank me or holler at me. She just blinked. I wasn’t sure what that meant.

“For fuck’s sake,” I continued, “I don’t know how you made it this far by yourself. Have you taken a good look around?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I have.”

“Well, there you go.” I turned to Cranston and Russ. “You guys don’t have to come along if you don’t want to.”

“If it’s all the same to you guys,” Cranston said, “I think I’m going to head back. No offense? I just—I can’t take being out here. It’s depressing and it stinks.”

He was right. It did stink. Between the bodies in the streets and the unseen bodies rotting inside houses, Walden smelled like the inside of a dead groundhog that had been lying along the roadside for three days.

“I can taste it in the back of my throat,” Cranston complained. “The stench. It’s burning the shit out of my sinuses, man. I just need to head back and get inside, so I don’t have to smell it.”

“Suit yourself,” Russ said, and stepped past him. “Just be careful.”

Cranston appeared stunned. “You...you’re not coming back with me?”

“No. I’ll let you take the gun with you, if you want, but I’m staying. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let Robbie and Christy wander around out here by themselves. Christy wants our help. It’s the neighborly thing to do.”

Cranston stared back the way we’d come. Figures moved in the shadows, watching us. Swallowing hard, he glanced back at us again.

“You’re right,” he said with a nervous grin. “It’s the neighborly thing to do. I’ll come along, too.”

The four of us continued on our way. We didn’t speak, but when I reached out and took Christy’s hand, she didn’t pull away, and I saw her smile. The smile vanished when we reached the pet store.

She’d been right. There were still animals alive inside. We heard them from about a block away—dogs mostly, barking and yipping. We passed a man who asked us if we were interested in trading half an hour with Christy for some canned peas he was lugging around in a knapsack. It took everything I had not to shoot him. Instead, I just shoved past him. Christy had already hurried toward the store as soon as she heard the puppies. We had to run to keep up with her.

We raced through the door after her and skidded to a halt. Christy stood next to the counter, staring in shock. Remarkably, most of the animals were still alive. A few cages held dead pets, but the majority were still active, if somewhat weakened. Many of them growled or bared their teeth. I figured they’d probably been lacking human interaction and were beginning to turn feral. Others still seemed docile, even friendly. Or maybe they just wanted out of their fucking cages. The worst part was the stench. The store stank of dead bodies and shit—mostly the shit. Many of the pets had feces

sticking to their fur. But with the exception of the ones that had turned feral, most of the animals seemed okay, other than the fact that they were hungry, thirsty, and hadn't had their litter changed. Four cocker spaniel puppies pawed at their cage and whined at us. A group of kittens watched us shyly. Hamsters, gerbils, and mice scabbled about, running on exercise wheels and burrowing through pine shavings. But Christy wasn't looking at any of this. Instead, she was looking at the man standing in the middle of the store.

He was slightly overweight, thirtyish, and balding. He had that Ben Franklin look—long hair in the back, but nothing on top except scalp. He wore thick, coke-bottle glasses. It had been a long time since I'd seen a pair like that. One of the lenses had a big crack in it, and it gave the illusion that one of his eyes was distorted. White surgical tape had been wrapped around the nose bridge, holding the glasses together. He wore frayed cutoff shorts, white bedroom slippers, white tube socks pulled up almost to his knees, and the ugliest Hawaiian flower shirt I'd ever seen. The shirt was unbuttoned, and beneath it, he wore a white wife-beater shirt. It looked like at some point he'd spilled vegetable soup down the front of it.

But it wasn't his appearance or unexpected presence that made us stare. It was what the man was holding in his hands that captured our attention. He had a large, red helium balloon with a string hanging down from it. Apparently, we'd interrupted him in the process of tying the string around the tail of a struggling mouse he held in his other hand. Behind him, I glimpsed two portable helium tanks and a cardboard box full of deflated balloons. A spool of string and a pair of scissors lay on top of a nearby dog cage.

"Howdy," he said, smiling and nodding, as if we were old friends.

"Hello," Russ replied. "We don't want any trouble."

"That's good. Neither do I. You folks scared me for a second. I thought you might be looters or something. Figured you might want to steal my helium."

Cranston reached between the wire mesh of a cage and absentmindedly patted a kitten. Russ nodded at the man as if what he said made perfect sense. Christy and I just continued to stare.

"This was the last tank the party store had," the man continued. "And I'm not sure where to find more, so I've got to protect it, you see. I need it for the experiments."

Russ scratched his chin. "Experiments?"

"Yes. Come on. I'll show you."

He took a step toward us. My grip tightened on the pistol, and Christy raised her knife. The man just smiled.

"Are those guns loaded? If so, I'd appreciate it if you pointed them down at the floor. I don't need any holes—not in me or in my balloons. That would really halt my progress."

He threw his head back and laughed. When none of us joined him, his laughter died abruptly.

"Sorry," he apologized. "It just struck me as funny. A little scientific humor."

"You're a scientist?" Cranston asked.

"I am now. These days, we can be whatever we want to be. The apocalypse is sort of freeing, don't you think?"

Cranston shrugged. The rest of us said nothing.

"Come on," the man said again. "I'll show you my experiment. It's really quite fascinating."

He walked past us, still smiling and nodding. We glanced at each other in confusion and then followed him out onto the sidewalk. The man finished tying the string around the tiny mouse's tail, and then, before we could stop him, he released the balloon. Both it and the mouse drifted up into the sky. The mouse twitched and struggled, squeaking in terror as it rose higher. The balloon climbed slowly, weighed down with its unwilling passenger, but continued going up. The man pulled a pen and a small notebook out of his pocket and jotted something down.

"That's number seven," he said. "Seven is a good number, don't you think? I think seven is enough. Now I'll move on to the chameleons. Might be tricky. Don't their tails come off if you tug them too hard?"

"Yes," Cranston replied, sounding confused.

"I thought so. Oh well. I guess I can tie the string to their feet, instead."

I glanced up, but the balloon and the mouse had already vanished. If they were still up there, then they were either too high to see, or the darkness had swallowed them already.

"Don't take offense," Russ said, "but exactly what the hell are you doing?"

“Experiments. I told you—I’m a scientist now. Before, I was just an accountant, but reality has hit the reset button. We get to do things over again. I always wanted to be a scientist, so now I am.”

Russ held up a hand. “But what is it that you’re doing? What is the experiment?”

“Well, I’m trying to determine how far up the darkness is, and how it interacts with various living things.”

“But...” Russ paused, and took a deep breath. “Why?”

The man seemed nonplussed by the question. “Because somebody has to do something.”

My grip on the pistol tightened. I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. I could hear myself saying the exact same thing, right before I led that expedition out to the edge of town. I already told you how that cluster-fuck ended. Was I no better than this lunatic? In his case, the only things getting killed were rats and mice.

“We know what the darkness does,” Russ explained. “It kills anything that comes in contact with it.”

“That may be,” the man admitted, “but we must still follow scientific method. It’s all we have.”

“But why? Why waste time with this?”

The man’s voice took on an impatient tone. “I’m a scientist. Scientists study things, don’t they?”

“Excuse me a moment,” Christy said. “I don’t feel so well.”

Before I could stop her, she ran back inside the pet store and headed for the rear of the building. I started to go after her, but then the man continued his explanation.

“I started with seven gerbils. Then seven hamsters. And now seven mice. After the lizards, I’ll try the kittens. Like I said before, though, I’ll need to find more helium. Bigger balloons, too. I’m never going to get a kitten off the ground with these little things, let alone a baby.”

Russ coughed. “A baby? A baby *what*?”

“Well, a human baby, of course. An infant. What did you think I meant? As I said, we need to determine how the darkness reacts to different living things. We can’t just use animals. Luckily, the woman who lives next door to me is still in town. She has a newborn. A little girl. Cute as a button. She’s only a few weeks old, so she should be light enough to—”

Russ raised the rifle, put the stock in the hollow spot between his armpit and his shoulder, and pulled the trigger once. The shot was very loud. My ears rang. The man stood there for a moment and then toppled sideways onto the pavement. His mouth hung open, that last sentence now permanently interrupted. He made a dry, rasping sound and his tongue convulsed. Then he was still. There was a dime-sized hole in his forehead, but as he fell, I noticed that most of the back of his head was gone. Blood rushed from the wound—not jetting or spurting like in the movies, but gushing like water from a spigot. Tiny fragments of his scalp and skull lay scattered on the pavement.

“Holy shit,” Cranston gasped. “Oh, holy fucking shit, man. You just shot him.”

Russ lowered the rifle and nodded. “Yeah, I did. You heard him Cranston. He was crazy.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt he was crazy. But still...you *shot* him.”

“If I hadn’t shot him, there’s no telling how many people he would have hurt. That mother and her baby at the very least. You telling me we should have let that happen?”

“He could have been lying about them,” Cranston said. “I mean, if he was crazy, then how do we know for sure that they even existed?”

“Maybe they didn’t,” Russ replied, “but there are still plenty of others left alive in Walden. Plenty of babies. He could have just as easily gotten a hold of one of them.”

Cranston and I looked back at the body. Blood still pumped from the hole in his head.

“I don’t know,” Cranston whispered. “I just don’t know anymore, man.”

I didn’t know if he was talking to me, Russ, or himself, so I said nothing. Instead, I just stared at the man’s body and watched the blood pool on the sidewalk and run down into the gutter, pushing dirt and leaves and other debris before it. Russ was right. I knew he was right. And that was the thing. I didn’t feel bad about what had happened. Not a pang or twinge about him blowing the crazy guy away. I should have felt something. I’d just watched Russ murder a man. But at that moment, I was more concerned about Christy. The dead man was nothing more than an unpleasant

curiosity. I wondered if it was the darkness making me feel that way, or if I was just adapting to our situation.

“Jesus Christ,” Cranston said again. “We’d better get inside before somebody comes.”

“Who’s gonna come?” Russ waved his hand around in a sweeping gesture. “There is no law and order, Cranston. We’re it. We’re all there is. You think the people out here roaming the streets are going to enact revenge on us? They could care less about this asshole. It’s one more body for them to scavenge.”

As I watched the gutter run red, I wondered where the blood went once it fell through the storm drain and down into the sewers. They had to be blocked, too, right? If the darkness surrounded the town from all sides and above, then didn’t it stand to reason that it ran beneath us, as well?

Before I could mention it to Russ and Cranston, I remembered Christy and decided to check on her. I left my neighbors talking in the street and ran inside the store. I breathed through my mouth, but it didn’t do much to cut the smell. The animals were worked up—either by my presence or the gunshot or both. They whined, barked, and meowed, pawing at their prisons as I passed by. I ignored them. It was hard to do because they were so damn cute, but Christy was my main concern. I’d begun to think that she was right. Looking around the store, staring at all the innocents who’d been trapped here and were still alive—it made sense to free them. Even the feral ones. Their odds still weren’t very good once they got outside, but living as a stray was better than slowly starving to death inside a cage.

I glanced into some of the cages as I walked by and noticed that some of the dead pets had been partially eaten by their fellow prisoners. I shuddered. Maybe the darkness was doing the same thing to them that it had to us. Maybe all the animals had already gone bad. Maybe it wasn’t that they were turning feral. Maybe they were just fucked. Maybe their plaintive whimpers and cries were just an act to lure us into opening the cages. Then a little Jack Russell terrier turned around in his cage and wagged his tail as I walked past him. He was too weak to do anything else, but he certainly seemed friendly enough. I stuck my finger through the cage and he licked it happily. His tail wagged back and forth. When I pulled my finger back out, he whined.

“I’ll be back,” I whispered. “You just sit tight, little dude.”

I made my way to the rear of the store, training my flashlight on the walls as I went so that I wouldn't trip over anything. There was an open door in the back wall. It looked like it led to an office or back room. I saw flashes of light coming from the open door. Probably Christy's flashlight. As I got closer, I heard rustling noises and the sound of metal filing cabinet doors being yanked open and slammed shut.

"Come on. Come on! Goddamn it, Brandon! Where is it?"

The voice was Christy's. She didn't sound sick or scared or worried. She sounded angry. And frantic.

*"Where is it?"*

"Honey?" I stepped into the room.

Christy spun around and gasped, dropping her flashlight onto the floor. Her hand went to her chest. Her eyes were wide and startled. She stood in front of a row of filing cabinets. Next to them was a large metal desk. It was covered with papers, books, fliers for pet food and medicine, empty coffee mugs, and other miscellaneous debris. The drawers of the desk had been pulled open, and it was obvious at first glance that they'd been rifled through, as had the mess on top of the desk.

"Robbie. Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry." I shined my light into her face, and she flinched. "What are you doing back here?"

"I was...I got sick out there. And then I had to pee, so I was looking for the bathroom."

"But the toilets don't work."

"I know. But what the hell was I supposed to do? Just piss in the middle of the store? It stinks bad enough out there already."

I studied her. Christy and I had been together a long time, and I knew her pretty well. I knew what made her happy and what made her sad. I knew her turn-ons and turn-offs. I knew how to rub her back and shoulders in just the right way and how to make her come really fucking hard. I knew her favorites foods, her favorite smells, and her list of all-time favorite you-can-have-these-while-stuck-on-a-desert-island songs. I knew that she'd gotten the small crescent-shaped scar on her knee in the fourth grade when she fell onto some gravel while playing tag. I knew her other scars, too—the ones the rest of the world couldn't see. I knew where they were and what had caused them. I knew what scared her. What monsters from her

subconscious she saw when she closed her eyes at night. I knew what ghosts haunted her. I knew when she was pissed off, when she was tired or cranky, when she was on her period, or when she was struggling with a bout of depression or low self-esteem. I knew when she tried to hide those things from me. I knew when she needed to get high. But most of all, I knew when she was lying to me.

And that was what she was doing now.

Lying.

The question was why? I thought I knew the answer to that, too, but I needed to hear it from her.

“Christy.” I kept my voice low and calm. It was a struggle. What I really wanted to do was smack her upside the head with the flashlight and demand to know why she was bullshitting me. The urge was almost overpowering. I could see the act play out in my head, like a mini-movie or something. A vision.

All at once, I knew where that vision was coming from. The darkness. For the first time since its arrival, I was aware of the darkness inside my head. Maybe its physical form was still out there beyond Dez’s sigils, but a part of it—some psychic manifestation—was inside of me. I could actually feel it—tiny, invisible fingers poking and prodding at my brain. Disembodied appendages, looking for a way in. Seeking emotions to turn into weapons. Trying to make me snap and kill so that there would be one less person left alive in Walden. The sensation was nauseating. My stomach churned. Bile burned my throat. Managing not to puke, I took a deep breath and tried to speak again.

“Christy. Hon. What were you doing back here? And please don’t lie to me. Okay? Whatever it was you were doing, it’s okay. I’m cool with it. I just need to know what’s going on.”

“I told you, Robbie. I needed to use the bathroom, and I—”

The darkness *pushed*.

“Goddamn it, Christy, I told you not to fucking bullshit me! Do you think I’m fucking stupid or something? You weren’t back here to take a piss. I heard you when I walked in. You were looking for something. Now tell me what it was.”

Her hands curled into fists at her side, but her shoulders slumped and she looked down at the floor. When she spoke, her tone was resigned and

quiet.

“Brandon’s stash. I was looking for Brandon’s stash. He kept it back here somewhere.”

“And how do you know that?”

She sighed, but still wouldn’t look me in the eye.

“Because he hooks me up sometimes. I’d come down here during my lunch break or on my way home from work, and he’d hook me up.”

The darkness pushed harder. I felt it spreading inside, enveloping my brain. I had to admit—I liked the sensation. It was almost...sexual. I know that sounds fucked up, but it’s true. Whatever the darkness was doing to me, there was definitely an underlying sexual tone. The more my rage grew, the more pleasurable it felt.

“So you were looking for drugs?”

“Yeah,” Christy admitted. “Weed.”

“All of this for some fucking weed. Do you have any idea how stupid this was? Any idea at all? I mean, Jesus fucking Christ, you know what it’s like out there in the streets. You’ve seen what the darkness is doing to people.”

“It’s still Walden. It’s still our home.”

“It’s a fucking cesspool, Christy! You could have been hurt. Hell, you could have been killed. We *all* could have been killed. Russ. Cranston. What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I—”

“I’ll tell you what you were thinking—you weren’t. Plain and fucking simple.”

Christy’s eyes flashed with anger. She took a step backward and that just enraged me more.

“Were you fucking him?”

“Who?”

“Brandon. Your side dealer. Were you fucking him on the sly?”

“No!”

“Giving him blow jobs, then? Was that it? You suck dick for drug money, babe?”

“Fuck you, Robbie! How dare you?”

I crossed the room in two quick strides and grabbed her wrist. Christy flinched and tried to pull away, but I yanked her closer.

“How dare I? Don’t turn this shit around on me, Christy. You’re the one who fucking lied. You’re the one who gave me that bullshit fucking story about saving all the little animals in the pet store, when all the time you just wanted to find your boyfriend’s stash.”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend. I didn’t even like him.”

“Yeah, but you liked his weed all right, didn’t you?”

“You smoked it, too, Robbie, so fuck off. I didn’t hear you complaining when you smoked a bowl after work. Maybe I should have fucked Brandon. Weed just made you a lousy lay anyway.”

I didn’t realize I’d slapped her until it was over. I didn’t realize I was grinning either. One moment we were shouting at each other. The next, there was a sharp crack and Christy got quiet. My hand stung. Her cheek turned white and then red.

Christy whimpered.

I laughed.

And I swear to fucking Christ, I heard the darkness inside my head, laughing with me.

“R-Robbie?”

Still grinning, I laid the pistol down on the desk and stepped toward her. Christy backed away and ran into the wall behind her. My fists clenched, then unclenched. Pleasure ran through me like an electrical current. My dick was rock hard.

“Robbie, don’t...”

“You fucking bitch.”

Christy held up her hands in an effort to either defend herself or just warn me away. Whatever her intent, it was ineffective. My grin split wider as I wrapped my hands around her throat and began to squeeze. Christy’s eyes went wide with panic. She stared at me in disbelief. The terror in her expression made me feel wonderful. My whole body tingled. My erection swelled, popping right out of the fly in my dirty boxer shorts and straining against my zipper. I squeezed harder—felt my fingers dig deep into her skin. Felt something wiggle and grate inside her neck. Christy’s eyes bulged. Snot ran out of her nose and down her upper lip. She opened her mouth but made no sound. She reached for me and grabbed my wrists, but I barely felt her grip. Her fingernails punctured my skin. The pain was like a kiss.

And then Russ and Cranston rushed into the room. Cranston slid to a halt and stared at us, shocked. Russ raised the rifle and sighted it, pointing the barrel right at my head.

“Robbie? What the hell are you doing?”

“Stay out of this, Russ.”

My grip tightened further. Christy’s hands began to beat and flail. She grabbed a fistful of my hair and tugged, but I yanked my head free.

“Robbie,” Russ yelled, “let her go. Now!”

“I told you, Russ. Mind your own fucking business or you’re next.”

At that moment, I felt the darkness retreat a little. Not enough that I could stop myself, but enough that I suddenly became aware of just what I was doing. Then, as if sensing my doubt, the unseen presence redoubled its efforts. I locked my elbows and shoved Christy into the wall. Her eyelids fluttered. A thin line of blood trickled from her left nostril.

“Robbie!” I hadn’t realized Russ had crossed the room until he jammed the rifle barrel into my cheek. I winced at the pain. The metal jarred my teeth and pressed hard against my gums. I tasted blood.

“I’ll count to one,” Russ said, his voice calm. “You don’t get a two or a three.”

My eyes flicked to the gun, then back to Christy’s face. And just like that, I was myself again. I released her and stared at my hands, as if they belonged to somebody else. Christy sagged to the floor and doubled over, coughing and gagging. A moment later, she threw up. The sound was terrible—hoarse and ragged. Russ didn’t remove the rifle. He kept it pressed against my face.

“Russ...”

“Shut up, Robbie. Just shut the hell up. What were you doing, man? You were going to kill your girlfriend. Is that what it’s come down to?”

“It wasn’t me,” I said. “It was the darkness.”

“I know it was the darkness. But how do I know you’re okay now? How do I know your not gonna try it again as soon as I put this rifle down?”

“I’m okay, now. Seriously. It’s me. Christy? Baby, are you okay?”

Her only answer was a retching noise.

“Jesus,” Cranston gasped. “I can feel it in the back of my head. Pressing in on me. It wants me to...do things. What you did, Robbie—it ain’t right.”

“It wasn’t me, Cranston.”

“I know. We all know. And it’s not me that’s wanting to run over there and gouge your eyes out with my thumbs right now, man. It’s that shit out there. We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Christy?” I knelt beside her, gently touching her shoulder as if she were made of glass. The tender gesture seemed absurd, considering what I’d been doing to her just a few moments before. “Honey? Are you okay?”

She slapped me across the face, catching me by surprise. Her face glistened in the flashlight beam—tears and sweat and bile.

“Get the fuck away from me, you son of a bitch!”

Her shriek was hoarse. Her voice didn’t sound like it usually did.

I held up my hands. “I’m sorry, baby. I am so fucking sorry. It wasn’t me. One minute, we were arguing, and the next...I’m sorry.”

She took a deep, stuttering breath and sobbed.

“I know,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I know. I felt it too, while we were fighting.”

“We all did,” Russ agreed. “It took everything I had not to shoot you, Robbie.”

“What the hell do we do?” I glanced at each of them. Out in the pet store, the animals continued to bark and yip and whine. “I mean, how the fuck are we supposed to fight this? We’re losing our minds here.”

“We’ve got to stay away from each other as much as possible from now on,” Russ said. “Stay away from everyone.”

“Too much negativity, man,” Cranston added. “Negative emotions are no good. They just bring on bad karma.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’d say this is some pretty wicked fucking karma, Cranston.”

Christy wiped her eyes with her shirttail. “So we just stay away from each other?”

Russ nodded. “From everybody. No one is safe anymore. All it takes is some little thing, some perceived slight or offense, to set us off. We can’t risk that. We’ll go back together, but once we reach the building, I think we should each stay in our own apartment for a while. And if I were you two, I’d consider sleeping in different rooms for a few days at least.”

Before we left, the four of us freed the trapped animals. Some were too sick or weak to move. These we placed on the floor, trying our best to put

them in areas that would provide shelter—under desks, counters, and displays—until they had the strength or will to move again. Others scampered out the open door or ran around the store. We released everything—the dogs, kittens, hamsters, gerbils, mice, rats, snakes, frogs, and lizards. We even released the hermit crabs and a terrarium full of crickets that were meant to be food for some of the other pets. Surprisingly, they didn't turn on each other immediately. I'd figured the snakes would go after their prey right away. Instead, they seemed sluggish and disinterested. A few of the more active cats chased after the rodents, but the smaller creatures scampered to safety. The only pets we didn't free were the fish, because none of us could think of a way to safely transport them to the town pond. Cranston suggested releasing them into the sewer, but none of us bothered to try. By that point, we were too tired and still distraught over what had happened in the back room. We opened all the food we could find and dumped it in scattered piles across the store. Then, after making sure the door was propped open, we left the store. The crazy scientist's corpse was still lying on the sidewalk. Amazingly enough, he was still bleeding. I hadn't realized just how much blood a human body contained until that moment. We went around him, but Cranston stepped in a pool of blood and left brownish red tracks in our wake.

Christy reached for my hand. I was shocked at first, surprised that she'd want anything to do with me after what had just happened. She didn't say anything. Didn't even look at me. But when she reached for it again, more insistently the second time, I accepted. We walked together, holding hands. It was enough.

I noticed something else as we began the long trek home. The streets had been mostly quiet on our way downtown. No longer. There were all kinds of sounds indicating activity, but all of it was happening out of sight—in buildings and alleys and side streets.

In darkness.

We walked in silence, but all around us, the shadows were alive with screams.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

For the next week, Christy and I lived together but apart. We stayed separated, afraid to get too close to each other in case one of us snapped and tried to kill the other. Oh, don't get me wrong. We didn't spend all of our time apart. We still talked and stuff. But for the most part, we kept our conversations short and focused only on noncontroversial stuff. Anything that might have sparked a disagreement between us, no matter how stupid or trivial, was avoided like dynamite. The only time we discussed anything more in-depth than small talk, was when we first got home from the pet store. That night, we discussed our feelings and emotions. I apologized over and over again, and Christy kept telling me that she forgave me. Thing was, I didn't feel forgiven. Not by her, and not by myself. I could still see the fear in her eyes—a newfound distrust. I knew it well. I felt the same way about myself. I didn't know me anymore. Didn't like me anymore. Didn't trust myself anymore.

Despite everything, Christy stuck it out. She apologized, too—for lying about her reasons for going to the pet store, for endangering us all, and for never telling me about Brandon. She insisted once more that she'd never slept with him, that it hadn't been like that between them, and I told her that it didn't matter.

And so we stayed, spending our days and nights together but apart. Or maybe I should say spending our nights together, since there were no fucking days. Time was just one big night. One big after dark. You know that old saying, "it's always darkest before the dawn"? Well, it was true.

Except the dawn never came.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There was a knock on the door a few days later. When I opened it, Russ pushed past me and dashed inside. He was out of breath and appeared nervous and worried.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He held up a finger, silencing me, and glanced into the living room. “Is Christy here?”

“Yeah. She’s pulling marijuana seeds out of her bag and trying to plant them in with the house plants.”

“Christ. Still with the weed? Even after the cluster-fuck at the pet store?”

I shrugged, then nodded.

“How’s she gonna grow them? There’s no sunlight.”

I shrugged again. “She thinks she can shine the flashlight on them a little bit every day. She’s desperate, you know? Somehow I don’t think our connection is gonna have any more weed for a while. In truth, I don’t even know if he’s still in town. And that Brandon douche bag is gone, too, I’d imagine.”

“Seems like a waste of water.”

“Yeah. But it keeps her happy. What else am I gonna do?”

“I don’t know. Do what you have to do, I guess. How you guys been holding up?”

“We’re okay. You?”

“Surviving. This separation shit is hard. I’ve been ducking out once a day, walking the streets and seeing what I can find out. It feels good to talk to people, even just for a little while.”

“What if something happens? What if they piss you off and you snap?”

“Then at least they were a stranger, and not a friend, like you guys or Cranston.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “Still dangerous though, dude.”

“Shit, Robbie. You have no idea.”

“What do you mean?”

Russ paused. He seemed to be debating whether to continue, so I prompted him.

“What’s on your mind, Russ?”

“I don’t know if Christy should hear this or not. Maybe we should go upstairs.”

“Why? Is it bad?”

“Hear what?” Christy walked into the kitchen, brushing potting soil from her hands.

Sighing, Russ plopped down in a kitchen chair and folded his hands on the table. His expression grew even more troubled. I studied him closely. He didn’t look good. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the whiskers on his face were turning gray. I tried to remember if they’d been gray before the darkness arrived. I didn’t think they were.

“Jesus, Russ,” Christy said. “What’s up with all the fucking drama? Who died?”

“Maybe us, if we’re not careful. I just talked to Cranston. He’s been sneaking outside, too. Not as much as I have, but a little bit each day. He sticks to our block. Only talks to people he considers safe. But he’s scared and pissed off. To be honest, I’m pissed off, too, after what he told me. Apparently, T and Mario have been skulking around outside, making noise about us and how we got their friends killed.”

“Who are T and Mario?” Christy asked.

“Two yo-boys who went with us when we tried Robbie’s plan to breach the darkness. They lived. Their friends didn’t. And now they blame us.”

“Fuck them,” I said.

“And I said the same thing,” Russ agreed, “but there’s more. Cranston says they’ve got new people listening to them now.”

“Who?”

He shrugged. “Cranston didn’t know any of the newcomers. Just strangers. But they’re not just juvenile delinquents like T and Mario. There are other folks—older people. And they’re looking up to T like he’s some kind of leader. People are pissed off and scared and looking for someone to blame. And apparently, T’s got a few of them convinced it’s all our fault.”

“How many?”

“Not too many, so far. Maybe six, all told. But if it keeps up...”

Christy's eyes were wide. "You don't think they'd kill us, do you? From what Robbie said, what happened to their friends wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, but they don't see it that way," Russ said. "And we all know that the slightest seed of anger or resentment or any other negative emotion is like dynamite these days. So far, they've been content just to lurk out there in the shadows. Maybe they're afraid to move against us. Bunch of little pussies—pardon my French, Christy."

Despite this new fear, she grinned. "I don't speak French."

"But if they get some braver people urging them on," Russ continued, "or if whatever is lurking out there in the darkness pushes them hard enough, who knows what kind of stupid shit they might try to pull?"

"They don't have guns," I said. "Remember? The day we went out there, me, you, Drew, and Clay were the only ones who were armed."

"Yeah, but there's all kinds of guns just lying around. Like the rifle I picked up. There are guns everywhere. How many people in this town went deer hunting every year? Christ, most places gave their employees the day off for the first day of deer season. Same thing with the high school. It was a town holiday. There are plenty of guns inside people's houses. Plenty of ammo, too. And even if they don't have a gun, one of their new recruits might."

"Okay." I paused, considering. "The best offense is a good defense, right? So let's work on our defenses. We know the fire escape is secure. It doesn't reach all the way to the ground. So we just lock the downstairs door—make it really fucking secure. Then we reinforce Cranston's windows—maybe put plywood over them or something. He's got the entire first floor."

"He's paranoid enough already," Christy interrupted. "He'll never go for that."

"Yes, he will," I said. "Cranston will understand. Either that, or he can find somewhere else to live. We do all that, and we make sure the storm door down in the basement is secure, and just stay away from our windows, and we'll be okay. Right? They can't shoot what they can't see."

Russ shook his head. "What's to say they don't try burning this place down with us inside? Or what if they get in somehow, and try coming at us with a knife, like that Anna woman did?"

I went to the cabinet, pulled out the tequila, and poured each of us a double shot. There wasn't much tequila left in the bottle, and I'd been

intending to save it for a rainy day, but this seemed like a good occasion. I was beginning to suspect it would never rain in Walden again.

“Speaking of Anna,” Russ said, after slamming his shot, “there’s more bad news.”

I grimaced as the liquor burned the back of my throat.

“Anna has been telling people what happened out there as well. But in her version, it’s all Dez’s fault. She’s saying that he’s some kind of devil worshipper, and that he’s the one who summoned the darkness. She says that you and I might have helped him do it, too. I reckon that’s on account of me fighting with her. She’s also saying that Dez is the one who burned the churches down.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said. “He lives in the abandoned shed behind the Lutheran church. Why would he burn the place down? That’s like burning down his own home.”

“I know, but that’s what she’s telling people, and they’re starting to believe her. Like I said, folks want someone to blame. No, it’s not even want. They *need* someone to blame. Anna and T are providing them with that. And the bad news is, you and me are the scapegoats. Christy too.”

“But I didn’t even do anything!”

I heard the fear in her voice. It reminded me of how she’d sounded when I confronted her in the pet store. I closed my eyes for a second, willed the memories to fuck off and take the guilt with them, and then opened my eyes and looked at Russ.

“So what’s Cranston intend to do about this mess? I mean, he lives here, too. Why isn’t he up here with us for this little powwow?”

“So far,” Russ said, “they’ve left him alone. I don’t know why, and neither does he. Maybe they don’t blame him the way they blame us. At least, T and Mario don’t. But if this keeps up much longer, he says he’s going to move.”

“Move,” Christy exclaimed. “Move where? He can’t leave town.”

“No,” Russ said, “but there are plenty of other places where he can hide.”

“Not without interacting with others,” I said. “Has he warned Dez?”

“No. Nobody’s seen Dez since...well, since what happened out there on the edge of town. If he’s still around, then he’s in hiding.”

“We’ve got to warn him,” I said. “It wasn’t his fault. He was the only one there who actually did anything useful. If they want to blame me, okay. I’ll take that shit. And they are welcome to bring it. But why fuck with Dez? Sure, he’s a weird fucker, but he knows more about this situation than anyone else. We can’t let them hurt him.”

Christy groaned, and Russ reached for the bottle and poured himself a refill.

“I thought you were done playing hero,” he said.

“I am. This ain’t playing hero. This is about keeping the one guy who might still be able to save our asses out of the hands of a bunch of angry, intolerant dipshits who want to blame everyone else for their problems. Face facts, Russ. Dez is the only motherfucker in this town who has a chance at getting us out of this mess.”

Christy shook her head. “But if you go out there, and T and Mario or this Anna person is waiting—”

“Fuck T and Mario. And fuck Anna, too. We’re not staying inside this place like prisoners anymore.”

“Why not?” Christy asked. “I mean, we haven’t gone outside in days anyway. Aren’t we already prisoners?”

“She’s right,” Russ said. “This ain’t a town anymore. It’s a goddamned prison.”

“This is different, and you guys know it. I’m gonna find him and warn him.”

Russ started to stand. “Then I’m going with you.”

He scooted his chair back from the table and rose to his feet. His knees popped.

I held up my hand. “Not this time. One of us needs to stay here and guard the building. Plus, I’ve talked to Dez more than you have. If he’s going to trust anybody, it’ll be me. And besides, what if we get mad at each other while we’re out there? What if whatever is influencing our fucking emotions makes us turn on each other? What happens to Cranston and Christy and Dez then?”

“Good point.” Russ sat back down with a sigh. “I don’t like it, but you’re right.”

“Okay. I’ll sneak out the back and head over to the church. Maybe Dez is still hiding out in his shed. If not, maybe someone has seen him.”

“And what are you gonna do when you find him?” Christy asked.

“I don’t know. Like I said, I’ll warn him, at the very least. Maybe invite him to stay here where it’s safer.”

Christy bristled at that. “I don’t want some weird homeless guy living in our apartment, Robbie. We don’t have enough food and water for the two of us the way it is.”

The darkness played my emotions, and I felt that familiar, sudden anger begin to rise. I wanted to shout, *Well, maybe we wouldn’t be low on food if you didn’t sit around and stuff your fucking face all day*, but I managed to squash the urge and bit my lip instead, hard enough to draw blood.

“I don’t want to argue, honey.”

“Well, there’s another reason, then. We’ve been stuck in here together, trying to avoid each other as much as possible so that we don’t fucking kill each other. How much harder is that going to be with a third person living in the apartment?”

“He can live in the basement,” Russ suggested. I wondered if he could sense the tension building inside of me.

“Exactly,” I said. “Nothing down there but mice and cockroaches. He’ll probably feel right at home. Hell, it might be a step up from that shed he’s living in now.”

Christy rolled her eyes and pursed her lips.

“What if he’s not there?” Russ asked. “What then?”

“I’ll leave him a note. Warn him somehow. Hopefully, he’ll see it.”

“Well, you should get going then.”

“Yeah. I guess I’d better.”

“You still have the handgun?”

I nodded.

Surprisingly, Christy didn’t argue anymore. Maybe she was busy trying to rein in her own violent emotions, as well, or maybe she just saw that I was right. In either case, she stayed quiet.

Russ made me wait long enough for him to run upstairs and get me some extra ammo for the pistol. I dropped the bullets in my pocket, and my jeans sagged a little lower. I hitched them up and tightened my belt. Then I kissed Christy good-bye and went downstairs, past Cranston’s apartment, to the basement door. It was dark and dank down there, and my flashlight

barely penetrated the gloom. I didn't care. By now, I was used to walking through darkness. What I minded more was the musty, cloying smell of mildew. It seemed to hang in the air like fog. I could almost feel it on my skin and taste it on my tongue. Water dripped somewhere in the shadows, and I thought I heard something scurrying—a rat or a bat, maybe.

I hurried over to the storm door and pushed it open from the inside. Flecks of rust rained down on me. Blinking, I brushed them away and then pushed the door the rest of the way. The hinges creaked and groaned, but the alley behind our building sounded quiet. I peeked outside and verified that the coast was clear. Then I climbed out. Muffled hip-hop music blared from the front street—which meant that T and Mario were probably somewhere nearby. Cranston had been right about that at least.

I tiptoed down the alley, giving our street a wide berth, and made my way to the church. I didn't turn on the flashlight. Didn't want to attract any attention if I could help it. I tried sticking to the shadows as much as possible, which was pretty easy, considering our circumstances. Everything was one big fucking shadow.

There weren't many people on the street, and the ones who were out and about looked dangerous or blitzed out of their goddamned minds. Each time I encountered them, I hid until they'd passed by or snuck around them as best I could. One guy wore a length of baling twine around his neck. Attached to it were about a dozen human ears—a grisly necklace. A teenage girl approached a fluttering bird with a broken wing. She carried a cinderblock with her, grunting and straining at the weight. The bird flopped around in the street, squawking with fear. The girl laughed as she smashed the cinderblock down on it. An old man stood on the sidewalk. Next to him was a plastic storage tub filled with nothing but Barbie doll heads. He'd reach into the tub, toss a head at the windows of a nearby house, and then repeat the process over and over again. He sobbed the entire time. A naked fat guy stood in the middle of the intersection at Second Street and Sycamore Lane. He was jerking off, literally yanking his dick so hard that I thought he might pull it off. He was so into it that he didn't see the two people who snuck up behind him and then stabbed him in the ass with sharpened broomsticks. The man fell over, screaming. His attackers leaned on their makeshift spears and shoved the weapons deeper. I thought about getting involved—opening fire and putting them down like mad dogs, but I

resisted the urge. I couldn't afford the attention and didn't want to waste the ammo. I saw a junkie shooting up with heroin. His right knee and lower right leg looked swollen—straining at the fabric of his dirty jeans. He stank—not just body odor but a deeper, danker reek. The smell of infection. Of rot. Then I realized that it wasn't just him.

It was the town.

And Walden wasn't the only thing dying. I noticed something else as I walked. The plants were starting to fail, too. With no sunlight or rain, they'd begun to wither and die. Their limbs drooped listlessly and once-lush leaves were now curled. This was the time of year they'd have started to change color anyway, but instead of going from green to red, orange, and yellow, they merely turned brown. I wondered how the lack of sunlight was affecting us. A sharp decrease in skin cancer seemed to be the only positive, but instead of dying from melanoma, we'd just get eaten by the darkness—or killed by somebody it had driven insane. The sun had to be up there somewhere above the black curtain. If it wasn't, we'd have all frozen to death by now. But if it was there, we weren't getting the full benefits. Scientifically, it made no sense—at least, not to me.

I made it across town without any altercations, and I approached the church ruins with caution. The smell of smoke and burned wood was still noticeable, and even though there was no wind, I could taste ashes in the back of my throat. The ruins were deserted, except for a skinny cat, prowling through the debris. It ran when it saw me. I debated whether to turn the flashlight on, now that the coast was clear, and decided to keep it off.

The dilapidated utility shed that Dez called home stood on the far corner of the property, just beyond the church's parking lot, bordering a back alley. The building had seen better days. If the fire had touched it, instead of the church, it would have been a blessing. Four layers of paint had peeled away in various sections, revealing gray, weather-beaten planks, as if the building had leprosy. Entire swaths of roof tiles were missing, and a groundhog hole marked the spot where varmints had tunneled beneath the wall and gotten inside.

The door wasn't padlocked or barred. I crept up to it, listening for any sign of nearby activity, but the back alley remained silent. There was some faded graffiti painted on the door. I didn't recognize it, but it was vaguely

similar to Dez's runes. I wondered if he'd painted this as well, and if so, what it meant.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked quietly, and then waited. There was no response, so I knocked again—louder this time. Still nothing. My fingers closed around the door handle, and I pulled, gently at first, but more firmly when it wouldn't open. I turned on the flashlight and shined it on the door, but couldn't see any kind of blockage. I tugged harder, grunting with the effort, but still the door wouldn't budge.

"What the fuck," I muttered. "Must be locked from the inside."

"No," said a voice from behind me. "It just doesn't know you. It won't open if it doesn't know you."

I spun around, nearly dropping my flashlight and the gun. Dez stepped out from beneath the shadows of a broad, dying oak tree.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I gasped. "You scared the shit out of me, dude."

"Sorry. I was watching you. I didn't know what you wanted. But then I remembered who you were. You were the man who was nice to me."

"I...guess so."

"You were," he insisted. "I remember your face and your colors—the colors most people can't see. Your name is Robbie. Robbie Higgins. You were nice. You didn't call me names or throw things at me, like some of the other people do. That's nice. But the door won't open for you, no matter how nice you are."

"And why is that?"

"Because it doesn't know you," he repeated, pointing at the symbol. "You see that?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"That's like a special lock. It only opens for me."

"More runes and magic pictures, huh?"

Dez shrugged. "They're words. Just a different kind of words. Words are important. Words and names. They're everything. If you know something's name and you know the words to make it go away, then that's a good thing, right? That gives you power over it."

"Sure. If you say so."

"Do you want to come inside? I have soda pop, but no ice."

I nodded. "That would be cool, man."

“No, it’s warm. Like I said, I have no ice.”

I suppressed a smile. “Warm is fine.”

Dez glanced toward the black horizon and shuddered. “He’s watching us.”

“Who?”

“He Who Shall Not Be Named! It’s like a big tumor, infecting the universe. And now it’s here. Don’t you understand anything?”

“Not really. That’s why I’m here. I’m hoping you can explain to me just what the hell has happened. And I’ve got something to tell you, too.”

“Inside. We shouldn’t talk out here. He’ll hear us.”

Dez pulled on the door and it opened without resistance. He walked inside and after a moment’s hesitation, I followed. The door swung shut behind us. I shined my flashlight around. The shed’s interior mirrored the outside. It was full of junk—old lawnmowers, gas cans, shovels, pickaxes, rakes, garden hoes, pruning shearers, canisters of weed killer and rat poison, plastic floral arrangements and tiny American flags for the nearby cemetery, holiday decorations, a child-sized plastic wading pool, and other debris. In one corner of the shed—the section with most of the roof still intact—six wooden pallets had been lined up side by side and covered with thick cardboard, forming a square platform. On top of this platform was a half-deflated air mattress, some dirty pillows, sheets and blankets, a Styrofoam cooler, and a small kerosene heater. While I waited, Dez lit the heater, and its orange glow filled the shack. His features seemed less grizzled in this light. Softer. I turned off the flashlight. He rummaged in the cooler and handed me a warm can of generic-brand ginger ale.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So...you live here all the time?”

He nodded. “Yes. The people in the church were very kind. They didn’t mind me staying here. And now most of them are gone—and the ones who aren’t gone don’t come here anymore. So it’s just me.”

“Well, listen, Dez. I’d like to ask you some questions about what happened to us. Remember? The darkness?”

“I saved you.”

“Yeah, you did. You saved all of us. Our asses would be grass right now if not for you. Like I said outside, I don’t really understand what’s

happening. I need to learn more. I'd like to talk about it, if that's okay?"

He frowned. "You won't call me a witch?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

"The woman who was with you called me a witch. And she's telling other people that, too. She doesn't think I know, but I do. I stay hidden and I hear things."

"Well, screw her. As far as I'm concerned, this town owes you. Her, too. I don't even want to think about what would have happened if you hadn't shown up out there. You seem to be the only person in town who's got a handle on this whole thing."

"You mean the darkness."

"Right. What is it? Obviously, it ain't an ordinary darkness."

"No, it's not. It has a secret name, just like everyone else, but we can't speak its name out loud. If we did, that would bring death and destruction to us all. Some people call it He Who Shall Not Be Named."

"So that's what is inside the darkness? A thing? A...person?"

"No. There's nothing inside it. It is what it is."

"I don't understand."

Dez smiled sadly. "The darkness is just...darkness. But alive. It doesn't always look like darkness, though."

"Yeah," I said. "We ran into that ourselves. It looked like my grandfather at one point."

"It can look like more than that. It can look like whatever we're afraid of. And other things, too. A goat-man, fire, a storm cloud, a big snake—all kinds of things. If you're afraid of something, the darkness can see it in your mind and then take that shape."

I nodded, thinking about how the figure in the darkness had kept changing form and shape.

"Each time it disguises itself as something like that," Dez continued, "it frightens somebody and feeds off their fear. The darkness has unlimited shapes. More than infinity. And it has different names, too. Othel. Verminus. Nuada. Lud. Nud. Shub-Niggurath. Pahad. Lilitu. Lamashtu. The Father of Pan. The Living Darkness. The Sire of Kali. A whole bunch more."

"But none of those are its real name?"

“No. Those names are just ones that people invented over time. None of them are its real name. None of them give us power over it. That’s why knowing its real name is important.”

“But if you can’t say its real name out loud, then what’s the point of knowing it at all?”

“You can use its real name in written words. Not spoken words. You can bind it and banish it if you know the words. Like I told you, words are important. Words and names.”

I paused, trying to decide if he was crazy or if he really knew what he was talking about. When we’d confronted the darkness and Dez tossed the salt at it, he’d really seemed to know what he was doing. But now, sitting here in his hovel, I was starting to have doubts again.

Something skittered and scratched in the shadows. It sounded like a rat or mouse. I glanced around. There was a mildewed cardboard box in the corner that I hadn’t noticed before. It was overflowing with books. I peered closer. Some of them looked very old, and judging by their covers, some weren’t even in English. There were pentagrams and other occult stuff on the covers. Weird symbols and drawings.

Dez followed my gaze. “You like my library? I’ve never shown it to anyone before.”

“You’ve read all of those?”

“That’s where I learn the words from.”

“Okay,” I said. “So this darkness is a living creature and we can’t say its real name. But that doesn’t tell me much, Dez. What is it, exactly? Where the fuck does it come from and, more importantly, how the hell do we get rid of it? Do those books tell us any of that?”

“Sure. To answer your first question, the darkness is one of the Thirteen.”

“The thirteen what?”

“Just the Thirteen. They are the oldest things in the universe. Some people think they are demons or gods, but they aren’t. They came from a universe that was around before this one. The Bible tells us that God created the universe, but it doesn’t tell us that in order to have the power to do so, He had to destroy the universe that existed before this one. He needed the energy.”

I groaned. “God, huh? I’ve got to be honest with you, Dez. I don’t believe in God.”

“That’s because you don’t understand Him. He’s not just the God of the Christians. He’s the god of many. Yahweh. Allah. He has many names, and most of what you know about Him is probably wrong. They did that on purpose.”

“And God, or whatever you want to call Him, killed an entire universe to create ours?”

“Right. Everything in that old universe was used to make this one. It was completely wiped out, except for the Thirteen. Nobody knows how for sure, but they escaped the destruction, and they’ve been the enemies of God ever since. They blame Him for what happened to their universe, and they’ve sworn to destroy our universe in revenge. They go from planet to planet. They use floods or plagues or bring the dead back to life—whatever they can do to destroy things. Sometimes they work together, and sometimes they don’t. After they’ve destroyed a level, they move on to the next one. That’s what He Who Shall Not Be Named wants to do when he’s done here, but I’ve stopped him. He won’t leave till he’s finished us, but he can’t finish us. He’s stuck.”

“You’re talking about the devil, right? Satan and his demons?”

“No. I said, they aren’t demons. They’re worse than that. There is a real Devil, of course, but he’s not the one you have to worry about. Even Satan isn’t as strong as the Thirteen. You should learn their names. Ob, Ab, Api, Apu, Leviathan, Behemoth, Kandara, Meeble, Purturabo, Shtar, Kat, and...”

Pausing, he scrunched his face together, frowning in concentration. Then he sighed.

“Oh, shoot. I used to be able to remember them all, but I’m forgetting one. But it doesn’t matter. What was I saying before?”

“That these Thirteen are stronger than the Devil.”

Dez snapped his fingers. “That’s right! They are very powerful. But the most powerful among them is He Who Shall Not Be Named. It is alive—a living darkness, and it goes from world to world, gobbling each planet up like gumballs. That’s what happened on Mars, you know. It used to be just like Earth. People lived there, and they were shiny and happy, until the

darkness came and sucked their planet dry. A few of them made it out before the end, but not many.”

I took a sip of soda. “You’re losing me here, Dez.”

“The darkness has infected other planets before ours. He invaded most of them, but a few planets invited him. They welcomed him. Worshipped He Who Shall Not Be Named as a god. The twin moons of Yhe and the fungal gardens of Yaksh. On Io. That big red spot in the middle of Jupiter. And on other versions of Earth, too. See, we’re not the only Earth. There are many other Earths, just like ours—but a little different. Maybe on one of them, you don’t live in Walden. Maybe you live in New York. Or maybe you have brown hair instead of blond. But it’s our Earth’s turn now. The darkness has come for us. It brought eternal nighttime—like a total, planet-wide eclipse. It’s eaten up every living thing—all the people, animals, plants. It sucked up all their energy and left an empty husk behind, like a locust shell. Did you ever play with locust shells? I used to when I was young. I remember that. I don’t remember much, but I remember that. I used to pick them off the trees and put them in a jar. Then, when I had enough, I’d line them up and have them fight my plastic army men.”

“The darkness, Dez. Let’s stay focused, buddy.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. Another thing the darkness can do is possess people. It takes control of their bodies and uses them to do things that it can’t—like wipe out the sigils and seals. But it can’t do that this time because some of the words I used keep it from doing so. It can nudge us. Make us fight each other. But it can’t actually order us around like puppets. So now it’s waiting. When the darkness is done, it will go somewhere else. But like I said, it can’t yet, because I stopped it. Everything else is gone, but He Who Shall Not Be Named can’t get into Walden. And that has made the darkness very, very angry. I’m sorry that I don’t have any ice for your soda.”

“That’s okay. It’s fine like this.”

“Do you like it? I like ginger ale. It’s fizzy and tickles my nose sometimes.”

Sighing, I set the can down on the pallet and ran my hands through my hair.

“Look,” I said slowly. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. You’re telling me that the darkness is alive, and it goes from planet to planet,

sucking the energy out of everything before moving on, and now it's here on Earth, which is just one of many different Earths, and it spread out over the planet, but you kept it from coming into Walden?"

Dez beamed. "You've got it! I knew the words and how to keep it out. I did good, right?"

"Yeah, Dez, you did great. If things ever get back to normal, I'm gonna ask the mayor to give you a fucking giant gold medal and the key to the city."

His smile vanished. "But things aren't going to get back to normal, Robbie. We're all that's left. This is it. A key to the city won't open any doors—at least, not the kind of doors we need now."

"Well, what happened to everyone else on Earth? Where are they?"

"Inside the darkness. Inside its belly. Gone."

My stomach felt like somebody had kicked it. My hands shook and my feet felt cold.

"So...they're all *dead*? What, you're telling me that the fucking Earth has been destroyed except for us?"

"No, not destroyed. The Earth is still here. But everyone on it—every living thing—is dead. Swallowed by the darkness."

"Except for us."

"Right."

"Because of your magic fucking circle."

"It's not a circle. It's a square. It goes all around the town and up into the sky."

"You know what I mean, goddamn it!"

"Are you mad at me, Robbie? Did I do something wrong? Do you think I'm a witch?"

I sighed. "No, Dez, I'm not mad at you. I'm just frustrated. This is a little hard for me to believe. Magic and darkness that's alive and fucking demons..."

"I told you, the Thirteen are not demons."

"Whatever. It's just a little hard to swallow."

"But you saw it for yourself. You saw what the darkness can do."

"Yeah, I did. I'm well aware of what it can do. But even still. All this stuff you're telling me. Maybe it's too much at once, you know?"

“I’ve only told you a fraction. There’s so much other stuff—the Great Deep and the Void, Heaven and Hell, how the Creator’s soul is trapped in an endless cycle here on Earth, and the Labyrinth, with all those doors to all those different levels.”

I set the gun and the flashlight down and rubbed my temples. I was starting to get a headache. Luckily, it was just brought on by stress and not anger. One thing I’d noticed was that since the moment we’d entered Dez’s shack, I hadn’t felt my negative emotions getting out of hand.

“Levels?” I asked, trying to be polite and hoping that whatever tangent he was getting off on now would help me figure out how to save me, Christy, Russ, and Cranston.

“That’s what they call all the different worlds. All the different realities. They’re levels. Each level can be reached by going through the Labyrinth.”

“Dez, don’t take this the wrong way, but what the fuck are you talking about?”

He sighed, clearly impatient with me. It was a full minute before he spoke again, and when he did, his tone was like somebody explaining something to a small child. My first urge was to tell him to stuff his condescending tone up his fucking homeless ass—but I needed him. And in truth, it wasn’t his fault that I wasn’t schooled in Whack-Ass Magic Shit 101.

“The universe is made up of different levels,” Dez said. “You’ve got planets and solar systems and dimensions and alternate realities. Each of these is a level.”

“Right,” I said. Now I was the one growing impatient. “You told me that already. I’ve got it.”

“There are other levels, too—places like the Great Deep and what you’d call Heaven and Hell, and the lost level that nobody ever comes back from. I used to be able to explain it better, but I can’t anymore. It has something to do with strings.”

“String theory?”

He snapped his fingers, grinned, then nodded. “That’s it! String theory. Picture the planets—Earth or Mars or Venus. Each of those planets has different versions of themselves. Different levels. To get to them, you go

through the Labyrinth. It's like a shortcut. It winds through space and time to all the different levels."

"So how come we don't use it?"

"Because most human beings can't see it. You have to know magic—or be crazy. But the Thirteen use it. That's how they get around to all the different levels. He Who Shall Not Be Named actually lives in the center of the Labyrinth. He squats there like a big black spider and sends out feelers through the Labyrinth."

"Well, he's here now. And I don't care what form he takes or what his real name is. The only thing I need to know about He Who Shall Not Be Fucking Named is how to stop him? How do we make the darkness go away?"

"We can't. Haven't you been listening, Robbie?"

"Yeah, Dez. I have. But it's hard to understand. You keep talking in circles and repeating yourself and going off on wild goddamn tangents. Work with me here, dude."

"It's too late to banish it now. The darkness has eaten too much. It's too powerful. All we can do is keep it outside. It can't totally possess us and it can't cross the barrier, but it won't leave either."

"There's got to be a way, man! You stopped it from coming in. You took away its ability to possess people. And what about out there at the edge of town? The salt and the symbols. You chased it away with that once before."

"I kept it out. That's all. I confined it to the edges of town. But we can't make it go away. That's impossible. Early on, before it completely breached our world, we could have. It's been done before, on different Earths. But not now. The darkness is too strong now. It's consumed too much."

"Fuck..."

"Yes."

"So, it'll just keep taunting us? Making itself look like our loved ones or something we're scared of?"

"I'm afraid so."

"So we're screwed."

"It could be worse."

“How could it be any fucking worse?” I threw up my hands in despair. “What? I’m supposed to be thankful that we’ll just starve to death instead of being eaten? I’m supposed to be grateful it can’t possess us, too?”

“It can mess with our minds, though,” he said. “Our emotions. It makes us get angrier than we really should. Makes us kill each other. Or shows us what we’re most afraid of or what we want the most.”

“Yeah, I figured that out already. You told me that already. You’re repeating yourself again. And even if you weren’t, believe me, I know all about it. It’s happened to me, and I’m still pissed off about it. Happened to my girlfriend and my friends, too. But what I don’t understand is why would the darkness do that? It wants to eat us, right? Why make us kill each other inside Walden? It can’t eat us if we die inside the town limits.”

“It wants us to come out. It wants us to breach my barrier. If things get bad enough inside town, then people will run into the darkness instead.”

“No way. That’s suicide. There’s no way it could make everyone do that. Things can’t get that bad. I’ll eat a bullet first.”

“You might, but others might not. They might not be that brave. But it doesn’t matter. The darkness is very strong. And patient. If we don’t come out, it will make us come out. We will turn on each other. We’ll start sacrificing each other to it. You wait and see.”

“Well.” I sighed. “That was the other thing I’d come here to talk to you about. You said earlier that you know Anna is running around town and telling people that you’re a witch. But that’s not all. Some of the other people in town think that you...”

I paused, realizing that Dez wasn’t listening to me. He’d turned his attention to the heater. Its glow was beginning to fade.

“I’ll need to get more kerosene soon,” he said. “Kerosene smells funny.”

Suddenly, I felt like crying. I was frustrated and scared and fed up.

“Dez, how did you...get like this? I mean, you seem pretty smart. At least about what we’re dealing with here. You know all this magic and stuff. Why are you...?”

“Homeless?”

“Yeah. For starters.”

“I’m not homeless.” He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. “This is my home.”

“But why not go to the YMCA or stay at the shelter in Verona? Why live here, in this shack?”

His voice grew quiet and haunted, and he stared straight ahead, as if seeing something inside of the glow of the heater.

“It is said that there are seven—seven people across all the levels who can band together to defeat the Thirteen. Me and six of my friends once thought that we were the seven. But we were wrong. A long time ago, we tried to stop another of the Thirteen.”

“The darkness?”

“No. Its name was Meeble. Others call him Croatoan, but his real name is Meeble. He is not as strong as the darkness, but he was still more powerful than we were. Unlike He Who Shall Not Be Named, Meeble only has one form. He looks like a cross between a monkey and a cat. Compared to some of the other Thirteen, Meeble is slow. He spreads his destruction town by town, village by village, city by city. It takes him a very long time to destroy a world. He tried it here, on our planet. He was working his way through West Virginia when we found out about it. He came in the night, killing small mountain towns where not many people lived. He’d destroyed six of them before we found out, and by the time we arrived, he’d destroyed two more.”

“What do you mean? How do you kill a town?”

Dez frowned. “The same way you kill a person. We beat him, though. We made a stand in a town called Huttonsville. They had good lemonade there. And blueberry pie—except that they called it huckleberry pie.”

“Dez...”

“Right. Sorry. I’m drifting again. We fought Meeble in Huttonsville. We waited until we were sure he was in town and then we bound him to that place. He couldn’t get out. Neither could anyone else. The battle went on all night and into the next day. See, he’s weaker during the day, so that was good. We sent Meeble back and closed the Labyrinth door that he’d come through, but not before he killed a bunch of us. Maria lost her head. Hembeck got strangled with his own guts. My best friend, Levi...Meeble tore him...and then he was in all these pieces, and I tried to put him back together, but I couldn’t...I couldn’t figure out where everything went, and he was so slippery and...and then the pieces got all sticky.”

“Jesus Christ...”

“No,” Dez said. “Not at all. What Meeble did...it hurt me. Made me like this. Mental and emotional trauma, the doctor said. Sometimes I forget things, but that’s okay. I still remember all the words and names and symbols. All the spells. And really, that’s all that matters. Those are what’s important. But I can’t remember other things. I can’t...”

His words dissolved into sobs.

“Hey. Hey, dude, don’t cry.”

“I...why do I have to remember what happened to Levi? That’s the part I’d like to forget, but my stupid brain won’t let me.”

“It’s okay,” I said, reaching for him.

He shirked away. “Don’t touch me. Don’t touch. No touch. Bad touch.”

I sat there, unsure what to do. Dez drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs—rocking slowly back and forth on the air mattress. He sobbed quietly. I picked up the soda can and took another sip.

“I can’t think too good,” he cried. “Not about stuff like having a job and taxes and getting married and things. All I can do now is this. Magic. I can’t do anything else. But that matters, right? I saved us. Didn’t I save us?”

“Yeah, Dez. You did, man. You saved us.”

I tilted the can back and swallowed the last sip. The warm sweetness made me sick to my stomach. I wasn’t sure what to do next, so I sat there and waited.

Dez continued rocking back and forth. He stopped crying, and began to mutter under his breath. It sounded like he was reciting something from memory.

“First among the Thirteen is Ob, Lord of the Siqqusim, who is also called the Obot, who is also called Mictla-techuhtli, who possessed both Lazarus and King Niqmaddu the Third upon their deaths and spoke from their heads. Second among the Thirteen is Ab, Lord of the Elilum, who is also called...”

“Dez?” I reached for him again, but then pulled my fingers away before I could touch him.

“...is Api, Lord of the Teraphim, who is also called Huehuetotl. Fourth among the Thirteen is Leviathan, Lord of the Great Deep, who is also called Cthulhu, Kraken, Tlaloc, Dagon, and...”

“Dez? Dez! Snap out of it, man. It’s gonna be okay. We’ll figure something out. Listen, there’s still some stuff I need to tell you. Are you listening to me? You need to be careful when you go outside. You need to watch your ass out there because Anna and some of the others think you’re to blame for this whole mess. Okay? Dez?”

“...and the waters covered the Earth...”

It was no use. Wherever Dez was at that moment, it wasn’t in the shed with me. It sounded as if he was reciting some kind of school report or something. Sighing, I stood and got ready to leave. As I’d expected, Dez didn’t seem to notice.

“Listen, man,” I tried one final time. “I’m gonna take off. You rest up for a bit. But remember what I said. You need to be careful outside. Later, if you feel up to it and the coast is clear, sneak to our place. Do you remember where I live? The apartment building I was standing in front of when I gave my speech? If you can come there, we’ll keep you safe. Okay?”

“I saved us,” he repeated. “I saved us all.”

“Yeah, you saved our ass, Dez.”

And he had. Christy was wrong. We weren’t dead. We were alive. There was no light to go into and this wasn’t Hell or Purgatory. The darkness was alive, but so were we. Dez had seen to that. Our friendly neighborhood crazy homeless magus had saved all of our lives.

But knowing now what we were facing and understanding just how desperate our situation was, I was beginning to wish he hadn’t.

The walk home seemed especially long, and the darkness pressed in on me from all sides. I saw people fighting. I saw all kinds of depravity. Insanity.

And I didn’t even care.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Time passed. I wish I could say that one day blended into the next, but it wasn't like that. Like I said before, there's no telling the days from the nights when you don't have the sun to guide you. Christy tried marking the passage of time by how often we slept, but she slept more and more often—sometimes thirteen or fourteen hours at a stretch, and then twenty or more. Pretty soon, she was waking up only long enough to eat and drink or go to the bathroom, and sometimes, not even then.

We stayed inside, forced into exile from the anxiety over T and Mario and Anna, and from all the other crazies now roaming the streets, and from the deeper, more primal fears of what lay out there on the edge of town, surrounding us completely. I repeated Dez's story to Christy, Russ, and Cranston. I'm not sure how much of it they really believed, but Russ and Cranston had seen enough with their own eyes to know that the darkness was supernatural, and Christy's terror was stoked by our own. Even though she still believed that we were dead and this was some fucked-up afterlife way station, she was scared enough not to leave the building.

We rationed our food and water, and tried to keep ourselves active and occupied. I started doing sit-ups, push-ups, and jumping jacks, but gave up after a few days. Just like a New Year's resolution to get in better shape, except this was more like an End of the World resolution. Christy and I read and played games and talked, until we were sick of all three—and of each other. Even when we made a concerted effort to keep our distance from each other and not interact much, we still fought and argued over the stupidest, most trivial things. The worst part was that we didn't know if it was the darkness making us do it or just plain old cabin fever. Once again, we ended up spending a lot of time on different sides of the apartment—not just avoiding each other, but living totally separate lives. Secretly, I was relieved when she started sleeping all the time. Although I'd never admit it to her—especially not after what had happened at the pet store—there were times where I came close to killing her. I'm betting that there were times

when she felt the same way toward me. I wonder now how many times she almost tried, and what I would have done if she had.

Cranston and Russ felt the madness, too, and as a result, we interacted less with them, even though they were prisoners in the building just like we were.

Cranston ended up moving upstairs with Russ. We nailed the windows in his first floor apartment shut and put thick sheets of plywood over them. Then we barricaded the front door with heavy beams, and chained the storm doors shut from the inside. If we needed to get out, we could—but T and the others would have a hard time getting in. We'd hear them before they did, and that was all that mattered. There was no hesitation in Russ or myself. The first person who crossed that threshold was going to catch a fucking bullet.

But that was okay. Murder seems to be par for the course in Walden these days. I remember when I used to sit in the living room and hear birds chirping or cars cruising past or kids playing down in the street. Now all I hear are screams and shrieks and gunshots. All I hear is madness and mayhem.

All I hear is darkness.

I can hear it right now, in fact. Coming closer. I need to finish this up and get a move on.

They caught Dez. We heard the commotion a few nights ago. One minute it was relatively quiet, and the next the streets were full of people shouting and cheering. I was instantly alert. My pulse raced, and my face felt flushed, but a strange sort of calm came over me. It was like that moment when the dark clouds that have been overhead for the last hour finally erupt into a thunderstorm.

"This is it," I warned Christy. "They're going to try to break in."

But I was wrong. They weren't. Not yet.

We ran out into the stairwell and found Russ and Cranston, who'd been coming to find us. Both of them had heard the commotion as well.

"You guys know what's going on?" Christy asked.

"I was up on the roof," Russ said. "Having a cigar. I need to finish them before they all dry out. All I know is that there was a fire off in the distance and there's a whole bunch of people in the street."

I frowned. "You don't think they'll burn our building down, do you?"

“I don’t know what they’d do. But the fire wasn’t that close. If I had to guess, I’d say it was down near the church where Dez was hiding out.”

“But someone already burned that church down.”

Russ shrugged. “Maybe it was another building close by there.”

The noise in the street increased, growing more frenzied. All four of us went up onto the roof and peered out over the side.

Cranston began to tremble.

Christy gasped. “Oh my God.”

I said, “Fuck me running.”

Russ said nothing. His expression was grim.

The crowd had Dez as their captive. We watched helplessly as they paraded him through the street. His hands and feet were tied together behind his back, and he dangled from a winch on the back of a tow truck. I stared at the vehicle. It was Tony’s tow truck—the guy who’d been parked out in front of our apartment in the tractor trailer. It was his stolen vehicle. I couldn’t tell if he was behind the wheel or not. Whoever it was, they drove slow—excruciatingly so. Dez twisted and spun. People spit on him and threw rocks, empty cans and bottles, and other debris as he went by. Anna led the procession, shouting Bible verses about witches and what to do with them. Our own little redneck, truckdriving, Bible-thumping version of Cotton Mather.

I glanced toward Dez’s shed. The fire was still smoldering, casting an eerie glow on part of the town. I couldn’t see what was burning, but I guessed that they’d set his shed on fire, and captured him when he tried to escape the flames.

The procession stopped right in front of our building. The driver killed the tow truck’s engine. Dez screamed at them to let him go. I scanned the crowd, recognizing several faces. In addition to Anna, I saw T and Mario. Ollie Griffin, the guy we’d given the batteries to at the grocery store, was there, too. All told, I estimated there were over a hundred people in the crowd, with more on the way. They approached from side streets and alleys. Some were probably just curious about what was happening, but most looked angry.

“This is what the wages of sin brings us,” Anna shouted, pointing at Dez. “We all stood aside while this witch practiced the black arts within our

town. He brought this darkness down upon us. Now we are being punished by God.”

“Stay here,” Cranston whispered to Russ and me. “I’m going to go downstairs and get the pistols and the rifle.”

“You?” I was stunned. “You hate guns.”

“True,” Cranston agreed. “I’m a pacifist. But there’s a time for peace and there’s a time for war, and right now, it’s time for war. I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t bother,” Russ said. “We can’t shoot them all. There’s too many of them.”

“If we kill enough of them, then I guarantee you that the others will lose heart.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “They might be totally overcome by now.”

“Well, I’ll take the chance.”

Before we could respond, Anna’s cries grew louder.

“God punished the rest of the world, but he gave us a second chance. We must honor God. We must follow His law so that the darkness shall be lifted, and then we can repopulate the planet as Noah and his family did in their time. We must do as the Lord commands. His word tells us specifically what to do with witches.”

“Oh no,” Russ wheezed. “Oh, hell no...”

T poured gasoline into a two-liter soda bottle and tossed it into one of the sputtering burn barrels. The fire blazed quickly, erupting over the rim. The tow truck’s driver started the engine and backed up slowly, positioning Dez over the barrel. He dangled there, shrieking as the flames licked at his feet. Then they lowered him into the fire. The flames raced up his pants, and then his shirt caught fire. Then his hair. It happened quicker than I thought it would. Looking back on it now, I have to wonder if they’d drenched him in gasoline beforehand. Despite the quickness, it took him forever to die. The rubber soles on his shoes melted and dripped. His skin sizzled and smoked. His eyes bubbled and steamed in their sockets.

Dez’s screams lasted a very long time.

The stench lasted even longer.

Not once did I consider helping him. I don’t think that any of us did, other than Cranston volunteering to get the handguns—and that was more out of self-preservation than a desire to help Dez. Maybe Russ and Christy

thought about it, but if so, they kept it to themselves. Maybe you think less of me for that, but I don't care. I'm done with trying to help people. There's no point. I mean, what's the sense in being a hero when there's no one left to save? Oh sure, I could have saved his life—repaid the favor for him saving mine, but for what? So that he could slowly starve to death here in Walden?

Maybe by not acting, I did him a favor.

Or maybe it was just the darkness, chewing away at my spirit, trying to convince me to go to the edge of town and step into its hungry embrace.

I do know this. I regretted not letting Cranston get the guns before. We could have ended Dez's suffering with one shot.

The crowd cheered and laughed. They hung around until Dez was nothing more than a smoking skeleton. Then they slowly drifted away, talking and chatting with one another as if they'd just watched a high school football game or a movie at the multiplex. We expected them to storm our building that night, but they didn't. Maybe their bloodlust was sated with Dez's death, or maybe they honestly believed that once he was gone, the darkness would go away.

Of course, the darkness didn't go away, and once they'd killed Dez, the mob grew a little braver. The crowd lurking around outside our home has grown since then. Each time I peek out the window, there are more and more of them down there, listening to T and Mario and Anna. Not the throng that turned out to roast Dez, but a solid group of core regulars who never seem to go home. I've considered that maybe Cranston was right. Maybe I should take a potshot at one of them from the rooftop, but I'm afraid that if I actually hit one of them, it will be like putting a match to a pile of gasoline-soaked rags. And besides, Russ says we shouldn't waste our ammunition.

Chances are, we're going to need it for what comes next.

Cranston turned traitor before the fire that consumed Dez had even died down. Maybe it was too much for him. I don't know. We assumed that he'd gone to get the guns. When he didn't come back, we searched for him. He snuck out through the storm doors before we could stop him. We managed to chain them up again before anyone got inside, but the damage was already done. The cracks in our facade were showing, and the mob seemed to gain strength from it. I figured they'd kill Cranston, but instead,

they welcomed him into their midst. All he had to do was turn against us—right there in the street for everyone to see his repentance at siding with us, the people who had assisted the witch in bringing the darkness to town.

Russ is right. We need to save ammunition.

I need to save at least one bullet for Cranston. That fucker deserves it more than anyone, as far as I'm concerned. He was our friend. We had his back. Now he's one of them. One of the crazies. So yeah, one of these bullets has his fucking name on it.

And I guess I should save two more bullets for me and Christy.

Just in case.

Russ is finished packing—he's traveling light—and Christy's awake now, so we're ready to go. I told them I needed five more minutes to finish this up.

The idea was mine. It's not a good idea. But it's all I could come up with.

Yeah, maybe I've given up on saving anybody else, but that doesn't mean I've given up on us, too. I can't. There's a part of me deep down inside that would like to, but I just can't do it.

I have to believe that Dez was wrong. Yes, the darkness is alive. I've seen that for myself. And yes, it does indeed seem to feed off us. There was nothing left of Drew and Clay and all the others. Hell, who knows? Maybe he was even right about the universe before this universe and all of that Labyrinth bullshit. Maybe all of it is true. Maybe God is nothing more than another villain—the biggest villain of them all. Maybe in another reality, I'm president of the United States of America. Or a rock-and-roll god. Or maybe Christy and I are married. Maybe we're happy. It could be, right? I mean, Dez knew his shit when it came to keeping the darkness out of this town.

But darkness crept into town anyway, despite his precautions. A different kind of darkness. Maybe it's connected to the darkness outside or maybe it's just the darkness of the human soul. I don't know, and it doesn't really matter. The fact is, the darkness will kill us if we stay here just as surely as if we left.

But there may be a way out. That's what I'm thinking.

Dez said that the rest of the planet had already been consumed, right? That all the energy had been sucked out of it, except for us here in Walden.

Now, I don't know a lot about planetary physics and shit like that, but consider—if all of the planet's energy were gone, wouldn't we be dead by now anyway, regardless of whatever magic spell keeps the darkness at bay? Isn't it energy that holds the planet together and keeps it turning? And then there are the stars. Russ said it was like the stars weren't there anymore, but if so, again—wouldn't we be dead? We orbit around the sun. If the sun were gone, then it stands to reason that it would be five hundred million degrees below zero right now. So, like I said earlier, what's keeping us warm?

There has to be something left. There *has* to.

How do I know? Because we should be dead and we're not. We're not dead yet. If we were dead, then there would be no reason to go on. I wouldn't keep fighting to survive, struggling against all odds no matter how many times I've sworn that I'd stop. No matter how many times I wanted to throw in the towel and give up. If we were already dead, then I wouldn't want to *live* so goddamned bad.

Back in Dez's shed, the night he told me the truth about all of this, he said something that stuck with me: "*It's not a circle. It's a square. It goes all around the town and up into the sky.*"

That got me thinking about what was around us, and above us and, most importantly, what was below us. Deep beneath the town.

When the idea first occurred to me, I wanted to go out to the edge of town, stand next to the darkness, and dig a hole in the ground, just to test my theory. I couldn't, of course. Not with that mob outside. But even without that field test, I'm sure that I'm right. Here's the thing—the darkness has to stop at some point. It can't go all the way through the ground, down to the planet's core and then out the bottom side of the world. At some point, there has to be an end to it all—an edge to the darkness. If it's a living being, then it has to have finite dimensions, right?

And if so, then all we have to do is find that edge and skirt around it.

My plan is simple. Russ, Christy, and I are going to sneak into the back alley. T and Anna have posted guards there, but we're hoping we can kill them before they raise the alarm. There's a manhole cover near the far end of the alley, right between the Chinese restaurant and the mailbox on the corner. We're going to get down inside the sewer and navigate the pipes until we reach the edge of town. The main pipe extends far beyond the town limits. It carries our waste water and sewage several miles away to the

treatment plant in the next town. It's a labyrinth, but not like the one Dez talked about. The maze of pipes goes under the highway and out into the hills and forests. The pipes are very deep. Hopefully, the darkness doesn't reach that far underground.

Hopefully, there's light at the end of that sewer tunnel.

We can't be all there is. There has to be someone—something—left out there.

If you found this notebook and you're reading it, then that means one of two things: Either you're trapped in Walden, too, or the crisis is over and the darkness has passed. If it's the first, feel free to follow us. I don't know where we're going, but it has to be better than this. That's probably not the answer you're looking for, and I'm sorry about that, but it's all I can offer you. There's no way to tie this up nice and neat and put a pretty little bow on it. Either we'll get away, or we won't. And if you follow along behind, then you'll find out for yourself.

Anyway...

We're leaving now. We're going out into the darkness.

And if it turns out that Christy was right all along, and we *are* already dead, then I guess we'll go out of the darkness and into the light. And that would be okay, too. I don't care where the light leads. I'd just like to see it one more time.

Good-bye.

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